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HOPE OF HEAVEN— OR HOPE OF EARTH

"Amoret, I don't know what to say," stammered Stephen. "There's nothing to say," she answered quietly. "I don't want it to be this way. I am only trying to have you back, the way we were before . . ." "You know I am your wife, Stephen." "But I want you to be my wife in more than name. I want you to love me, the way you love Joel Adams." She was silent. "And I mean to make you love me, no matter what the cost—to all of us!"

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'Margaret Lee Runbeck

**HOPE
OF
EARTH**

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Because of my affection for all Illinois and its history, I have been unable to select one specific town for the habitat of this story. Instead I have imagined a composite picture of many such towns and have called it by a fictitious name. Although the neighbors, and all others in this book, seem exceedingly alive and real to me, I must admit that they are, in truth, only fictitious characters.

DEDICATION:

For
B.F.A.

whose faith helped move this story

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PART I

*Her eyes were open, but she still beheld
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep.*

Eve of St. Agnes, JOHN KEATS

CHAPTER ONE

She did not open her eyes when she first waked up. She felt the sun shining on her eyelids; she could see little splintered rainbows rimming her closed eyelashes. One lock of warm, orris-scented hair lay across her cheek. She looked down at it (cross-eyed, no doubt, she thought good-humoredly); that, too, was vibrating prismatically. Each hair was like a violin string giving off sparks and arpeggios of color under the invisible bow of a sunbeam.

Then Amoret Phelps remembered what day this was, and she thought she had better back into slumber again and emerge more decorously. For this was the day her father-in-law's will was to be read to all the family. She tried to slip into her slumber, but in her mind she collided with Old Tobias Phelps. It was as if he had put his short blunt arms around her, exactly as he had done many times in life. A swift rivulet of sorrow ran unexpectedly out of her eyes and down her temples into her hair. Besides being her father-in-law, he had been her dearest friend.

She turned her head carefully on the lace-edged pillow. She knew from having it happen many times, that just looking at Stephen, her husband, or even thinking too ardently about him, could wake him up as surely as if she had called his name.

She glanced at him now, with excitement throbbing in her throat. After three months of being married to him, she still didn't know him. She loved him wildly, but she did not know him. . . . She wanted most yearningly to know Stephen. She had thought surely that being married would mean knowing someone as well as she knew herself. But perhaps people never did know each other? Perhaps they went around sixty and seventy years alone, with only a moment of knowing, here and there, shooting out like a dart, and then hiding again.

It might be that she could not judge how intimately families could know each other, for she had been an orphan ever since she was a small child, with only Mr. Benjamin Van Dyke, the Phelps's lawyer, as her guardian. She had spent most of

her eighteen years without a real home except one young ladies' seminary after another. Even last year when Mr. Van Dyke's spinster sister introduced her to Philadelphia society, she had not really had a home. But she had one now, and a family to which she would belong forever! She had persons who were related to her . . . by marriage, of course. Of these, and not excepting Stephen, her husband, with whom she had as yet only what might be called a loving acquaintance, the one she knew best was Tobias Phelps. But old Tobias was dead now, and this tear on her cheek was because she would never talk to him again.

She moved her finger one inch nearer Stephen's dark, clustered curls, but she did not touch them yet. His mouth as he slept had a sweet, persuasive look on it, as if someone in a dream were trying to resist him. Resisting, surely, would happen only in a dream to Stephen . . . he was a man so pleasant he always had his way with everyone!

She tried to imagine some circumstance in which she would not desire him to have his own way. She lay and considered that a long time, but she could not think of anything Stephen could want that she did not wish him to have.

She thought over some of the things other young matrons had told her about their husbands; it seemed to her that no one had ever been married to such a wonderful man. They all boasted, but even so. . . .

Nobody ever talked frankly . . . why was that? They talked about everything else, hours on end. What kind of ostrich tips you intended to have on your bonnet, who made the best riding habits on Chestnut Street, about the right place to have the fringe curled on your Tibet shawl . . . what Mrs. So-and-So meant when she had said something or other. But about the things that really mattered, nobody had any helpful advice. Except sometimes, Harriet, who was Stephen's sister-in-law. Yet Harriet didn't look like an authority on men. Harriet, with her mutton-tallow cheeks and her kind small eyes and the tight bouncing curls she wore on each side under her bonnet, looked like anything but a woman who understood men. And Harriet's husband . . . Amoret made a face; for sheer disloyal enjoyment, she made an even worse face, and she would have held her nose with her forefinger and thumb when she thought of Horace, her brother-in-law, but she was afraid of waking Stephen with such heresy.

The pleated frill of Stephen's nightshirt rose and fell in mighty swells across his chest. He was such a big man, and he slept like a baby. Sometimes he mumbled as he slept, and reached out in the huge, slippery-sheeted bed and seized her as if she were a little rabbit, and pulled her roughly within his arms. And all the time he never even woke up. She often wondered what he would say if she told him in the morning that he had done that. But she was too shy to tell him.

Moving so carefully that you could barely say when she had started, she pulled herself up on her elbows and looked around their bedroom. It was the handsomest bedchamber in Philadelphia, Amoret had been told. Everyone in the Chestnut Street set admired it. Stephen had pretended to be amused about that admiration, but she knew he was pleased. She saw through her husband sometimes . . . under his sophistication and modishness, he was like anyone else, very much pleased by praise. She looked over her shoulder at him, lying so innocently asleep beside her, and smiled with fond patronizing, because she had seen through him. She could never smile at him this way if he were awake!

The bedchamber was furnished with massive black walnut pieces, scaled to the size of Stephen rather than to Amoret. The highboy, where his immaculate smallclothes were kept, was half as big as a stagecoach, and this bed, with the handsome red damask canopy was so vast that four people could have slept in it. She laughed to herself, picturing the four of them trying to get along congenially. After all, it wasn't only space that counted in a bed. . . .

One place which was entirely her own was her little dressing room. Stephen had had the lovely furnishings, painted with Cupids and roses, sent over from France. She had not been allowed to see the room until he had it all finished. He had selected seagreen gauze for the curtains which billowed from the floor-length windows. Green to match the candleflames which sometimes flickered in her copper-colored eyes, he had said. Green, also, because everybody knew that a woman's red hair is never lovelier than when green is near-by.

A pinked valance ran around the top of the walls, giving the room a cozy, intimate preciousness, as if it were somebody's toy. Matching this valance and draped on the green gauze were rich over-curtains of Dresden taffeta, soft peachy

yellow, sprigged with clusters of mauve and pink moss roses. Two Cupids held up a garland across the pier glass. The rug was that valoury golden color often used for linings in jewel boxes. Sometimes when she came into this room she had the feeling that she was being encased in a beautiful jewel box. That was probably the way Stephen wanted her to feel . . . as if she were something rare and valuable encased in his love . . . to be taken out and admired sometimes, and then put back carefully.

There were six ceiling-high windows in the bedchamber, and they were shrouded with the richest wine-colored velvet, so that no night air ever could come in from the swamps around the Delaware. It was Tobias Phelps who had bought this country seat, safely sequestered from the busy city. He had bought the land long before, during the terrible Yellow Fever plague of 1793, when people feared this section never would be a healthy place to live in, because they believed the plague had been caused by the fumes that came up from the river lands. So Tobias' gesture of trust in Philadelphia had inadvertently given him a wonderful investment.

Tobias had loved this place; it had been more than land to him; it had been somehow connected with his deep faith that the finest gift he could give back to America, after his years of toil and industry, was a family of aristocrats who loved the land and nurtured it.

He had expected Stephen to be the first step toward that gift. Actually Tobias' life was over by the time he had his fortune amassed and his work done, and was ready to begin country life. He had started this beautiful ample house, and then when Stephen was graduated from the College of New Jersey a few years ago, he had turned it over to him to finish and to live in. The place and the dream that went with it.

It was a life beautifully suited to Stephen, the long days filled with gentleman-farming, the hunt meets, the dinners. Amoret could imagine it going on forever, a dream come true yet not inhabited by the man whose imagination had dreamed. But it had deeply gratified old Tobias to have his handsome aristocratic son live the life which had been denied to him by his own industry.

In spite of the six tall windows, the room was rather dark, with a most elegant restraint. But today even this room couldn't be gloomy, because the sun was new and brilliant,

and spring was on the way, for this was the fourteenth of March, in the year 1837.

She found her slippers with her toes, and still cautious about Stephen, she left the bed very gradually so he wouldn't feel her going and wake up. Much as she adored him, she wanted this moment by herself, to enjoy the way a woman sometimes does when she is alone. She put on her peignoir, a fleecy lavender one with a long ruffly train, and tiptoed across the room, passing herself in Stephen's big gold-framed mirror with the eagle and globe at the top. She knew she was probably very pretty, or Stephen wouldn't have married her. He could have married anyone! But he had chosen her, without money or important friends or anything else. For no other reason than that he loved her.

She opened the French doors that led out to the balcony and a warm breath of spring came flooding over her ankles and up her white body to her throat. Almost like an unexpected kiss. There had been rain in the night, and now the world was dipped in sunshine and sparkling along every edge. On either side as far as the eye could see, the land stretched like a melody, gently undulating. Boxwood hedges marked off some of the ordered plantings, and rows of Lombardy poplars punctuated others. The orchards old Tobias had had planted, plums, apricots, medlars, appeared as striped green and gold satin in the distance. The Lyons walnut trees he had had sent from France were quite tall by now, a cool mysterious forest. Before the house, enclosed by the pink brick serpentine walls which Stephen thought were so graceful, were the flower gardens. The earth had a tender, pinkish flush this morning, almost like flesh, for the men were beginning to prepare it for planting. The crocuses would come first, then jonquils, narcissus, and tulips, a vast counterpane of them, yellow and pink and lavender.

Stephen had planned to give a great ball when the bulb gardens were at their best. It was to be a reproduction of the famous Meschianza which Major John André of General Howe's staff gave sixty years ago, while the British were bottled up luxuriously in Philadelphia and the ragged Americans assembled themselves up the river. Amoret wasn't sure what that famous celebration had been about, but it must have been something *very* historic. Stephen knew all about it. . . .

The Meschianza was to begin early in the day, and the

hundred guests were to be towed on decorated barges along the river to Wide Acres. There would be bands and flags and floats representing amusing and fashionable episodes. The entire countryside would be out on the river bank, no doubt, to watch the sights floating past.

Already, although the ball was two months away, Stephen had made arrangements to hire nearly a hundred additional servants, male and female. He had picked them himself, mostly handsome young men, both blacks and whites who would look well in Oriental costumes. They were to be stripped naked to the waist, and hung with silver and imitation jewels.

After the water pageant the guests would come up to the field for the celebrated tournament and jousting bout. The queens of the tournament would be dressed in Turkish costumes, as daringly beautiful as anybody could devise. Each of the fourteen prettiest girls in Society at this moment probably was tossing in her bed worrying for fear somebody else was having a more beautiful costume made than the one being worked on upstairs in her own sewing room.

Stephen was having their ballroom, which was a stately room at all times, completely done over for this fabulous occasion like the Wharton's old pink and blue ballroom. He had sixty pier glasses studded into the walls from floor to ceiling, but it annoyed him that these were all the room would take, for the Wharton country seat had had eighty-eight. The candles alone which Stephen had ordered, to make the evening a star-lighted dream of beauty, numbered more than a thousand. He had gone over the elaborate menu for the great supper, time after time, perfecting and polishing it. The caterers even now were making the molds for the beautiful ices in the shapes of hearts pierced with arrows. The chefs had already designed plaster models to be made later in mousse and aspic.

Stephen, of course, was to be Major John André, and Amoret was sure that he would be a great improvement over the original, although everyone said that Major André had been the handsomest officer that ever sent American belles into a flutter. Amoret was to take the part of that famous beauty, Peggy Shippen, and Stephen was delighted with her costume. She herself blushed when she first saw it. The shimmering layers of gauze and net . . . every color of the rainbow . . .

which formed the Turkish trousers, hung in her wardrobe. The jeweled slippers were finished and were exquisite. Her head-dress was to tower to a glittering, gemmed pinnacle.

But now it might never be worn. Because the Phelps were in mourning, the ball might not be possible.

It was only a little after seven o'clock, but already five or six of Stephen's gardeners were working down at the bottom of his new French garden. They had bored holes in the ground around his decorative fig trees, which he had had sent from Marseilles, and were carefully filling the holes with some mixture of bone meal and castor oil which somebody down at Stephen's club had recommended. The little trees, small and pinched-looking, stood there in the sunlight, and every twig seemed homesick and reluctant.

But the row of espaliered peach trees, so gracefully impaled against Stephen's brick wall at the back of the garden, looked ready to bloom. It was too early for them, a month too early for blooming, but already they showed an adolescent expectancy. It reminded her of something very intimate about herself. She tried to avoid thinking about it, but it kept calling her back, and she stood there looking at Stephen's beautifully angled peach trees, each cut like a lacy candelabra, and each permitted to bear only six magnificent peaches . . . and tried to understand.

She thought about it, but not in words, for that would have been unwomanly and disturbing. She thought with her bones and blood, in a secret rapt understanding. Yes, that was it. The trees on the verge of budding were like the feeling she had in the midst of love. A tight terrible awareness that something shattering and explosive was going to happen. She would have liked to ask someone about it . . . but, even if she knew someone to ask . . . were there any words ever invented?

Perhaps there *was* nothing more to love than that rising and rising until her very bones seemed to float free of her flesh? Yet other things . . . other elemental things which were like passion (there she had said the word!) . . . fire, and a storm, and even music . . . came to some climax. Surely this could not be so different. She knew without being told that there should be a final crescendo, a pinnacle at last where she could poise a moment with wild wind whipping and bright sunlight dazzling. And yet she never had reached

such a pinnacle. Did that mean she was somehow at fault in her way of loving . . . ?

She was so lost in the despair of this wordless labyrinth that Stephen had to speak twice before she heard.

"Amoret . . . what *are* you doing?" he said, and his voice was husky from sleep, but also amazed, as it was when things were happening which he had not arranged. She swung around guiltily, as if he had known what she had been thinking.

"Oh . . . I woke up . . ." she said.

"You'll catch your death of cold out there in that breeze, practically unclad."

He jumped out of bed and seized his maroon velvet dressing gown, and striding to the door where Amoret was standing, he wrapped it quickly around her. He lifted her in his arms, carried her across the room, and playfully dropped her in the bed.

Then very quickly he swooped down beside her and gathered her against him, murmuring throaty half-words against her cheek. His lips were exploring her throat now, and a wild-fire was running before his lips up into her brain.

"I don't want you to give anything . . . not even one glimpse of you . . . to anyone but me. God, you're lovely, Amoret . . . standing there in that brightness. All the sun in the countryside seems to be shining in your hair . . ."

"Stephen, please," she said, breathlessly. "Stephen, it's late. . . ."

But Stephen had no interest in time. "You're more beautiful all the time. I am so proud of you in your beautiful clothes, but when I see you without those silly stays you women wear . . . and all the petticoats . . . when there's only *you*. . . ."

He looked down into her face, and his was a knotted grimace which almost frightened her by its fierce hunger.

"Beauty in the morning," he whispered. "There never was a man who loved his wife as I love you, Amoret."

She looked up into his eyes, and an unreasonable desire came over her. When they loved each other so much, one might expect they could talk together about this. One might believe she could ask and he could explain. But it was not like that at all. She was left more alone in this fierce moment than at any other time. Suddenly she felt the warm trickle of

her own tears across her temple and down into her hair. It was too late to hide them from Stephen.

He stiffened above her, and his dear face looked baffled and then hurt, as if he had been suddenly struck. In one fleet motion, he was away from her. He gnawed his shaved upper lip with his strong white teeth, but he kept his eyes on her face. After a moment he lifted his wrist and showed her the little coin of dampness made by her tears.

"What is it?" he asked. "Am I distasteful to you when you see me? My darling, I can't have that. . . ."

Now the tears were coming fast . . . too fast to be stopped. She was crying now for complicated reasons . . . the espaliered peach trees reaching up to heaven to welcome the buds which after all were really in themselves . . . a sense of woman's failure because she was helpless to follow this man into his realm of delight. In her inarticulate mind, there was a similarity between herself and the peach trees. The trees were reaching up to take something which, in the end, they must find in themselves. And she . . . she, too, was reaching up for something which Stephen could not give her, and which she did not yet know how to find.

But none of this could she offer as the explanation of her weeping, for it would only hurt Stephen's pride in his male necromancy. She knew with helpless panic that, until she learned how to be utterly subdued, she would always be in danger of wounding this man in his most vital pride. For this was the secret spring from which all his other joys and accomplishments would flow.

Then, shimmering over her confusion and despair like an outer husk of protection, lay another reason for her weeping, and this was the one which could be shown to her husband. She was crying for old Tobias, who some day might have talked to her as if she were another human being and not just a pretty woman. She was crying because Tobias was dead, and many unsought answers were dead with him. The frozen unreality of his big elaborate funeral a week ago at Christ Church had begun to thaw in her heart, so that now it ached with honest grief.

Stephen was still looking at her with shamed bewilderment; she put out her hand and touched his knee, and she sent as ambassador with the touch, an uncertain little smile. But it was not enough, for he had anticipated that by now, he

would be lying apart from her with the happy high tide of his blood pounding triumphantly on the farthest shore of his being.

"Darling . . . it isn't *you*," she said. "You know I'm . . . very fond . . . of you. But it's today . . . *today*, Stephen. . . ."

He was contrite in a moment. He seized contriteness, in fact, and donned it with utmost relief, since it was the attitude of a benevolent master, much more fitting than this humiliating rebuff.

"Oh, my dear . . . my fine little one . . ." he said. He shifted his position again so that he lay beside her, all along the length of her, holding her body with his own, almost as in a cradle. But now it was a protective embrace.

"It wouldn't be quite seemly, would it?" His voice was rich with the sweet pleasure of denial, and more even than that, with the special joy which Stephen found in anything that was "seemly."

"You must forgive me, Amoret. . . . I was carried away . . ." he said, and he looked as happy as if this whole thing *had* gone exactly as he had intended.

She lay drowsily against him now, relieved and yet half ashamed of herself, because there was something faintly dishonest in this whole moment, which had unexpectedly added up to being an ornament to her finer womanly nature. Unintentionally she had misrepresented herself as being something better than she was, and he had been delighted with the false interpretation. If she had valued her honesty more than she valued Stephen's pleasure in her, she would have had to explain and confess. . . . *Could* a woman ever value her own honesty more than her husband's delight in her?

She felt his warm eyes on her, and she smiled at him.

"You are so precious . . . sometimes I forget how rare you are," he said. It was one of his favorite words. Rare. He wanted nothing unusual or common, or too easily achieved; to him belonged only the finest and rarest, the long-looked-for-and-found.

Within himself, he was humble over this sudden view into his young wife. His very veins were flowing with the mellow voluptuous honey which only deferred pleasure can give, but his mind was stilled with worship of this child to whom he was married.

There would never be anything gauche or harsh or ugly in her. She was a sweet glade of delight, in body and in mind. The word "mind" surprised him, for he never before had used it in his thoughts about Amoret. And probably no one else ever had, he thought with amusement. But she must have a mind, somewhere tucked away among all that ravishing rest of her. He would find it some day, and teach it new little tricks. It might be very amusing to see how much he could develop it.

Then, in a sunny doze of imagining, he thought of her flesh, her much more imminent sweet flesh. Tonight, after all this tedious business about the will was over, his lips would sip it as they had sipped soft persimmons when he had lain as a boy under a tree on a lusty autumn morning.

It was as if both moments . . . that faraway one and this one at hand . . . had been two mirrors. He looked in one and watched the matching reflection of the other. A bee, drunk as the boy was drunk on the cloying persimmon wine, had bumbled in his ears; and now at this moment there was the same bumbling, but this was the seething simmer of his passion, cooling off obediently until another time. He felt again the tight wild thrumming in his chest which he had known then . . . all the pent-up love of living for which that boy had no expression.

But a man had ways of expressing that love. He moved his hand possessively, and touched the silken shoulder, round and fragrant as some unnamed fruit. She was both flower and fruit, his Amoret. . . .

(2)

When Harriet Pompanus Phelps woke up that morning of March fourteenth, she didn't think about her husband. She had exhausted that subject years ago. She had not necessarily solved it; she had simply given it up as completely uninteresting. It was, to her, old pulpy fare, which she digested as effortlessly as possible.

There were plenty of other people in Philadelphia who woke up thinking about Horace, no doubt. Worrying about him, probably; making themselves sick at the stomach trying to imagine what he was going to do next in some tight busi-

ness transaction, for Horace was a very shrewd man. And you can't be a shrewd man, it goes without saying, without having a horde of frightened, worried little people to work on.

But Harriet wasn't one of those people. She was married to him; had been for twenty-four years, and knew every crack and cranny of him wearily well. He couldn't scare her; he never had, once she had got her quick capable little fingers into his affairs. She knew how to smooth him with cream, she often said to herself smugly.

"A woman can handle any man if she keeps him just a little groggy from too much eatin', and just a little frazzled from too much lovin'. You know what I mean?" she sometimes said earnestly, when she was talking confidentially with some of her tart-mouthed cronies.

No, she found nothing to think about in Horace, "lying like a barrel of hot chowder" under the sheet next to her. His face was slightly purple from sleeping on his back and having trouble with his breathing. His face had a worried pugnacious look, with blandness spread over it like a sauce. She thought to herself that his face as he slept probably had the same expression a crafty ostrich has while it is hiding its head in the sand. That amused her, and the mound *she* made under the blanket heaved and rippled with her mirth.

There . . . she *had* thought up something new to think about her husband! She tossed her gay glance over at him and winked at his sleeping face. Harriet was a woman who had to have something new as other people have to have air to breathe.

"I pant. . . . I feel like I'm smothering to death . . . when I'm bored," she said now to herself. Yes, she liked something new, even if it wasn't quite as good as the old. A fly walked on Horace's nose, and his expression broke into an earthquake of protest. But he slept on.

She loved Philadelphia, and she liked to think about it. She knew the city much better than did most of the lily-livered women she had to spend her time with. She never talked about the way she knew the city, because that brought up the awkward old days when she had been a rooming-house keeper's daughter. A sassy, pretty wench, who knew a good thing when she saw one. And married it, too, she added grimly to herself. It would have been mighty easy to have had the thing end differently. But her mother had taught her.

"Virtue is its own reward," her mother had said piously.

But the wink she had given Harriet had made the meaning pretty clear. So it had worked out. Horace's father, old Tobias Phelps, had been mighty mad about it. But he couldn't help it. If Horace wanted her, he had to marry her. Well, all that was a long time ago, she thought wearily.

She'd given up a lot for Horace. It was hard to explain that. Most people thought she had got everything and given up nothing. But that wasn't true. She'd got this big house, and plenty of servants to take care of her, and all that solid silver in the dining room, and Horace's children, and all his dull friends and their wives who looked down on her as much as they dared. She had got all that. But she had given up something, too.

She had given up the city and the lusty living that was really her own. She had had a life unlived, always running along beside her like a poor beggar she pretended not to see. She had lived Horace's life, but her own she had not lived. Her own had been a ghost dogging her footsteps, a ragamuffin ghost with a sense of humor, making scurrilous remarks about all the finery and the fuss. Nobody but herself could ever hear that sneering disrespectful undertone of wit and wickedness. It had made things easier for her in many ways. For even when she had been sitting in the stuffiest of rooms with the dreariest of Horace's friends, she had kept herself entertained. Even when she had to listen to her own voice padded with complacency and boned with stiffness like a tiresome, uncomfortable gown, under all *that* was her bawdy enjoyable mind. No matter how swaddled and swathed was that mind under the properness of her life's attire, it never quite died or went to sleep.

She turned on her side now, her big sweet-smelling bulk humped like a chain of little mountains. She didn't want to look at Horace or think about his life that had settled like old age on her while she had been but a girl; she wanted to listen to the city waking up, to tiptoe around in her mind, imagining that beloved giant yawning and rubbing its eyes and getting up to go about the day's business.

(3)

Philadelphia did wake that March morning just as Harriet was imagining it, with a virile stretch and a boisterous yawn.

The rain was over and the air was sweet, and the city was "full of itself" as the darkies expressed it when they felt their healthy animal spirits bubbling in them. Things had been going very well for Philadelphia for some time now, constantly better and more prosperous, and the city was feeling well-fed, frisky, and free.

One half of the populace woke at dawn to get the day ready for the more fortunate half. But that is true of every city; only some cities go about their early-morning preparations stealthily and respectably, almost like attendants in a hospital, or servants in a well-trained household. Philadelphia was not like that these days. It was getting so you could not sleep late any more, people grumbled. Tradespeople and servants weren't the way they used to be, decent and quiet about their work. They woke up now with their mouths open, yelling good-naturedly at each other, bawling out uncouth jokes. People said it was worse even than New York, but they didn't mean that literally.

Men like Horace Phelps blamed it on Andrew Jackson, who had brought in such a rush of vulgar naturalness that the new administration would never get it swept out. Everybody had the idea he was as good as anybody else, if not better. Freedom of speech was running up and down the streets like a drunken tramp, dragging a tin can, and shouting at the top of his lungs.

And the traffic was becoming positively thunderous with all the business passing back and forth through Philadelphia streets. The old noisy cobblestones had been mostly replaced by bricks on the busier streets, except those, of course, down by the docks. But even so, there was a thunder and clatter of wheels all day. Omnibuses with their fancy names (the *Cinderella*, the *William Penn*, the *Nonesuch*) painted on their brilliantly decorated red sides rumbled in all directions, with workmen crowded into them, and even perilously clinging to the rear steps as the big top-heavy arks lumbered and swayed. Delivery wagons, hand-drawn carts, herdicks, private broughams wove in and out, each at its own pace, until it seemed that everyone in Philadelphia must be involved in some kind of an errand consuming time and space. Gone indeed were the leisurely old days, when people lived in repose and quiet in the City of Brotherly Love, when errands were done decorously and the omnibus ran once an hour. The fare

used to be ten cents which, to be sure, kept the working people off. But now you could ride for three cents, and the cobblers and butchers and fat old tradeswomen with baskets of plucked geese or pails of pickled oysters made the vehicles most entertaining for the rabble, Horace said, but entirely undesirable for the élite.

Philadelphia from morning until night was full of noise, because everyone was getting rich nowadays, and getting rich makes a great deal of scurry and bustle. Especially early in the morning, for industry is no late sleeper.

This was Tuesday, one of the two days of the week when the vendors and peddlers took over High Street. They were already out, jostling each other and jockeying for the best positions along the pavements. Many of them had slept in their carts or even rolled up in a blanket under the wagons if the family had too many children to tuck inside. Now they were cooking their breakfasts on their little charcoal braziers. The morning air had an acrid tang in it, and a blue haze hung over the noisy groups, squatting in a circle around the charcoal pots. They were a happy-looking lot, with tousled heads and broad snaggle-toothed grins. They shouted with their mouths full and made dangerously wild gestures as they talked and laughed, waving a steaming mug in one hand and half a stewed rabbit in the other.

High Street at this hour of the morning was a carnival. Groups called back and forth, making rough country jokes, broadly suggestive and simple. Peddlers, hung with festoons of household pots and scissors, dish towels, and even calico aprons, paraded through the crowd, gawping and commenting boisterously.

Towering above the lighter traffic, the Conestoga wagons, built up almost to a semicircle on the sides, so that their cargo wouldn't spill out on the mountain roads, lumbered along, laden with long-haul trucking. The burly teamsters, enjoying their brief while in the city, were making the most of the friendliness.

Milkmen, their cedar churns hooped with winking brass or smoldering copper, drove along in their wagons toward the residential sections of the city where they would measure out the milk into the tin cans standing on the stoops.

The scissors grinder, absently emitting his little bleat, "Any knives . . . any scissors to grind? Make 'em sharp, make 'em

keen," was trudging along beside his own shadow, humped from the whetstone perpetually piggy-back across his shoulders. His little bell, plagued by a string attached to his foot, dingdonged with every step. It was said that one of these patient fellows once walked down the long aisle of Christ Church, never realizing he was offending the saints and outraging the élite with every movement, so used was he to the sound of this twittering that dogged his steps.

A deeper throated bell was the sound of the charcoal man, as raucous a bell as he could find to imitate his blatant old horn that he had been forbidden by law to use in the last few years, since Philadelphia had become so dang-blasted refined. But bell or horn, his high grimy wagon was still an affront to refinement, leaving a shadow of coal dust wherever it stopped. Fortunately, you saw him only in the spring about this time, when the stoves retreated to attics and basements, and fireplaces were uncovered and opened again.

"Char-col! Char-col!" he shouted, with an upward tilt to the last syllable. You could buy a barrel for thirty cents, if you didn't mind the mess it made of the housemaids' fingernails, and the black dust it scattered no matter how carefully you handled it.

The prettiest peddlers of all were the fruit women with their large trays and baskets balanced on their heads. They sauntered with a swaying, regal grace, as if they were hearing the opening strains of ballet music which in a moment would swirl them into a dance. Even when their day's selling was done, and they carried home their trays, swinging them by the rims like big cymbals, they walked as if to music nobody else could hear.

Under the bright fruit on their heads, their faces took on a theatrical, made-up appearance, so that their eyes were glossy and their teeth always sparkled in their dusky skins. In the violet pastel shadow cast by the trays, they were exotic and beautiful . . . even the old wrinkled ones. Many of these fruit women were said to be the children of those very runaway slave-mistresses who had escaped from Haiti in the terrible massacre in 1791, when the blacks burned the city of Cap-Français to the ground. There were supposed to be thousands of these beautiful dark toys kept to amuse the decadent white men who had ravished the island and harnessed it to slavery to pile up fortunes. While it had lasted, it had

been a lecher's paradise . . . jeweled submissive mistresses, fabulous gambling, magnificent food, rummy twilights for lassitude and dreaming after the heat of the sun. But it had ended in horror, when the slaves had revolted and burned the warehouses and murdered both mistresses and men.

Scores of the women had escaped, savage with fear. They had swum out into the harbor with ropes of jewels tied around their bellies, and diamonds held in their teeth. There in the black water, half-naked and terrified of drowning and of sharks, they had had to bargain with the crews of the ships about being picked up and carried to America. They had no jewels or money now; the ships' owners had stolen those from them. Suits were still being filed every once in a while by some lawyer who thought he had a case against an estate, but there was usually no evidence to prove it. There were even people who said that Stephen Girard's great fortune had been swollen in this way. . . . But nobody could prove that.

Nevertheless, the long-legged beautiful Haitian mulattoes went on inhabiting their legend, loping dreamily through the years, romantic and voluptuous and gracefully out of place in this bustling, prim life. They smiled in the shadow of their trays, always trying to catch your eye. They reached out their plaintive sweet words and fingered you with their voices so that you felt the touch along your very skin:

"You buy any cher-ees? Straw-ber-ees! Fine ripe blackber-rees!"

One of the busiest industries of Philadelphia, of course, was cleanliness. This occupied a great deal of a great many people's time . . . house-servants, first, and all the peddlers and hucksters and specialists who served them. The scouring trade was always up early, and they had energetic voices, rough and cheerful, for their cries were addressed to the ears of their own class. The vendors who sold delicacies wheedled their voices into the air, but the men who sold brickdust and sand and soap fat and hickory ashes bawled their way brassily through the streets, knowing they were dealing with scullery maids and housemaids, who, of all women in the world, appreciate good rude masculine racket. These vendors delivered their wares with broad flattery. And flattery not always confined to words. After the early-morning transaction at the back-house steps, the maid went on through her day's scrubbing and scouring with something tangible to think about, a

chuck under the chin or some other only slightly less accessible location.

The sandman was one of their favorites, for he was often a brawny, vigorous lad who brought his buckets of sand in from the New Jersey shore. He usually had a tanned and jovial face, and strong-muscled arms that knew what to do with themselves. "In a pinch," the maids sometimes added slyly to each other, with a poke of an elbow in a rib to make the meaning clearer.

At night when they told the house-child, "The sandman has scattered sleep in your eyes; come along with you," they were suggesting sleep to their tiresome little charge, but they were also reminding themselves of the morning diversion. They often explained to each other, and to their mistresses, you *couldn't* keep a clean house without plenty of sand. There never was anything like it for scouring kitchen utensils until you could see your face in them. And on the scrub-brush, it gave the kitchen floor a whiteness that was prettier than any paint. Brickdust was perfect for shining brass candlesticks and the door plates that every respectable family had on the front door; but for some jobs, nothing was as good as fine New Jersey sand. That's what many of 'em said.

Spring brought out the whitey-wash man, usually a grinning, ancient Negro, with a clatter of pails and brushes. When you heard his cry in the streets, you knew that housecleaning couldn't be put off much longer:

*"Yere's the white, whitey-wash!
Brown whitey-wash!
Yellow whitey-wash!
Green whitey-wash!
Wash, wash!
I'm about!"*

Housecleaning would begin on the outer rim and work itself in like a tame tornado. It would begin with a new coat of whitewash on the high board fences and the outbuildings and smokehouses. It would creep inside, where the rooms would all be washed down with lime and water, sweet and clean-smelling, after the long stuffy winter. Then it would settle down in earnest, like some huge monster which picked up the defenseless house in its jaws like a mouse and shook it until its teeth rattled and it gave up its last secret dust.

In the better homes the heavy carpets and hangings all had to be rolled up like mummies and stacked in the attic. At the windows during the summer there must be China silk or linen, and on the floors there must be squeaky matting. The obese comfortable furniture in the living rooms had to be rustled into hiding somewhere, and spindley "cool" chairs, with skinny bow-legs, came out and stood around the walls stiffly like country cousins at a party. This summer furniture had cane seats that made a design of tiny hills and valleys on your bottom if you were a child unfortified by ruffled pantalettes. But this morning was in March, and the cane-seated chairs wouldn't begin their reign until late in May. . . .

This brought Harriet to thinking about her own house, that big solid ugly monument Horace had built to himself and his brains. It was a two-and-a-half-story mansion made of massive rubblestone, which looked as if the winds of heaven and the hinges of hell could never move it. It was as solid as Horace himself. Harriet often thought gleefully that it had its feet flatly planted on the earth in much the way Horace's big brightly waxed Wellington boots were planted. It had not one graceful or delicate thing about it, just as Horace had nothing flimsy about him.

Where some men had finely chiseled bones, Horace walked as if his skeleton were made of granite, heavy and durable. Horace's face was fitted massively with mutton-chop whiskers that looked as if they had been chiseled of gray limestone. Horace was meant to last; you could see that.

And he had built his house to last. Its lintels were not of wood, gracefully turned as in some men's houses, but of heaviest carved stone. The front door, which groaned weightily as it swung open, was a slab of oak bound not with brass but with iron itself. Over each door and window were fixed heavy pedimented doorheads, that looked like the stone mentioned in the Bible, "on whom it will fall, it shall grind him to powder."

Horace was very proud of his house on Spruce Street near Third; he liked the rich gloom in it, and the massive mahogany furniture he had ordered made for them up in Rhode Island. He had little patience with his younger brother Stephen's country seat with the furniture all imported from Europe, piece by intricate piece, during the years when Stephen was the most desirable bachelor in Philadelphia . . . before little Amoret married him. But then, Horace had little

patience with Stephen anyway. He thought Stephen was only a dandy, not good for anything but to spend their father's money.

Their father's money! That brought Harriet up sharply, for suddenly she remembered this was the day when the old gentleman's will was to be read. Harriet knew her husband had great hopes about that will. Horace was an ambitious man, and he took pride in the fact that he had made most of his way himself, without too much help from his father. But there were certain plans . . . "enlargements," Horace called them mysteriously . . . which would be helped along if Horace could just get his hand on his share of his father's estate.

Horace had invited the whole family, Amoret and Stephen, the bride and groom, his sister Eliza and her husband Trumbull Stacey, and their three duplicated daughters, to dine at his house tonight after the will was read. Horace had said he wanted something handsome; Horace always said that; and Harriet never flickered her eye to indicate that she was good and sick and tired of hearing him say it. *She* took care of the house, didn't she?

In her mind, she ran downstairs and inspected the preparations for tonight's dinner, which already must be under way in the kitchen. The women would be working spiritedly, wearing their muslin caps, with their calico skirts tucked up around their waists so that they could run around more freely in their petticoats. Sometimes Harriet wished rather wistfully that she could be down there with them. She never had got over the idea that people had more fun together in the kitchen than they ever had in parlors, mincing over tea tables and listening to the simpering prattle of a piano or the tearful dripping of harp music. A kitchen for the comradeship of other women; a bedroom for the rest of existence, Harriet thought heartily.

The girls, Hannah and May, those two giggling sillies that scuttled out of her way like plump hens whenever she appeared, would be polishing the silver, sitting on high stools, with the obese coffee pots and sugar bowls and water pitchers, the caster, the swan-shaped gravy boats, the silver goblets, and the massive tureens, ranged elegantly about them like pupils in a dame school. Mrs. Parker, the cook, and Mrs. Shamey, the second cook, would be working on the ducks. They would just about be half-way through the plucking and

Harriet hoped they had had sense enough to use plenty of powdered resin with the hot water to loosen the feathers, so they wouldn't have to spend all morning at it. They would stuff the roast ducks with a dressing made of fluffy wheat mush enriched with Malaga-grape wine and seasoned with spice; just the thought of that lusciousness made springs of sensation flow in Harriet's mouth.

They would use the best partridge-wing cloth on the table, and the six-pronged heavy candelabra in the center. She had ordered thick-stemmed red roses for the centerpiece, although she herself always thought these much too stiff and heavy. But Horace had never got over the notion that red roses on the table meant a splash of luxury.

To begin the meal they would have stewed oysters in the big silver tureens, and each oyster must be rimmed with a golden halo of melted butter (a pound to a quart, was her rule). That was her secret for fine stewed oysters, that and a generous flecking of ground pepper. Besides the duck, there would be beefsteak, and crabs, though Harriet thought crabs were an offense to any refined nose, no matter how you cooked them. There would be sweet potatoes and beets, and a mammoth tray heaped up with Horace's favorite turnips. The vegetables would be pretty poor, compared with the opulent fare Stephen had sent in from the hothouses to his own table, but this was March and people ate whatever could survive the winter's storing.

But what they lacked in exotic vegetables they made up in rich relishes. Brandied peaches, cherries in rum, chili sauce, piccalilli and some of that pickled ginger and raisins that Harriet had brought home from Washington . . . all these high-flavored relishes would be dotted about the table, and of course there must be more of them than anybody had time even to sample. There would be beaten biscuits, and spoon bread, and probably some of those rolls from that Boston recipe that everyone thought was so wonderful. (Though Heaven knows why!) The meal would end with pears and Madeira, and for those who wanted it, there would be apple pie smothered richly in custard.

Just thinking about it all so early in the morning made her a little ill. But that is how a hostess should feel, she thought righteously, if she is going to set a creditable table. Eliza, for all her own pampered, overindulged appetite, had never

learned how to order a really magnificent meal. Too mean, Horace said; just too stingy-mean. The meaner Horace saw Eliza, the more generously *he* behaved.

"Something handsome, Hattie," Horace had said last Friday when he had decided to have the family dinner party after the will was read. "However the Pater's estate is to be divided we'll have need of a stroke of diplomacy."

He kept his dark face locked against her, but Harriet knew exactly what he was thinking. No matter how his father had divided his considerable fortune, Horace meant to keep the reins in his own hands as much as possible. He would be the head of the house now. It would be starting off the new order properly to have the family assembled at Horace's house, where *he* would be seated at the head of the table, dispensing hospitality and largess to each of them.

"Yes, that will be a good idea," Horace had said with bland satisfaction, thinking all this out.

"You always have a good idea, my love," Harriet said, and patted his big beefy hand. "We can always depend on your having a good idea."

"Nonsense, my dear," he said automatically. But it pleased him, for it was exactly his own sentiments. He *could* always be depended upon.

(4)

The three carriages drove up within twenty minutes of each other. All the Phelps believed in the propriety of promptness. Even Stephen, the younger son, who believed more than anything else in doing what he found convenient. Benjamin Van Dyke, old Tobias' attorney, had asked in his letter that they would give attendance on the afternoon of March fourteenth at the hour of three.

Eliza Phelps Stacey's substantial closed barouche behind the two rotund-rumped chestnut mares, rolled down tree-shaded Walnut Street to Washington Square with pomp and importance. The carriage stopped before her father's big corner house, and the black footman got down smartly, and opened the door before the spokes of the carriage wheels had quite come to rest. Eliza herself, a vast continent of a woman, debarked with great dignity. She was surrounded by her

three islands of children, all plain daughters, born middle-aged. Between the islands and the mainland ran the fussy little bridge which was Trumbull Stacey, Eliza's husband. He was an aggressively pleasant little man with a cackle which waved out of his face like a cockade out of a hat. From the day he had been born Trumbull had wanted to please. He would die trying.

They made an impressive group on the brick pavement, and Eliza looked them over carefully and then led them up the steps to her father's house. A nausea of sadness and reluctance swept up in her, and she fumbled quickly in her reticule for her black-bordered handkerchief, and held it daintily to her round buttonhole of a mouth, but not before a pitiful little sob had escaped.

"Now, my dear," said Trumbull. "Now, my dear . . . let's make this as easy as possible for you."

"As if it could be easy!" said Eliza. "My poor dear father!"

Marianne, the plainest of the daughters, who had inherited a symposium of her father's least attractive traits and her mother's least attractive appearance, came forward and attempted to surround Eliza protectively. Marianne was one of those virgins who are both fat and lean at the same time; she had a scrawny neck at twenty-three, but she had also waddling hips, which even her petticoats could not disguise. And with all this, she had the added inconvenience of a very warm heart, which bubbled over everything like hot, uncomfortable lava.

"Oh, Mama, you're too sensitive," she said gently. "You know dear Grandpapa had to die sometime. He was a very old man, after all."

"None of you ever appreciated how I felt about Papa," Eliza said accusingly. All of them dropped their eyes deferentially, for they could not help remembering the anguish and chagrin which had always hung over their household like a cloud because Tobias and his only daughter never could agree on any point . . . and never could give up trying to hoodwink each other into seeming to. But all this must be put aside now in the decency of death.

The white marble steps of old Tobias' red brick house were snowy and sparkling from the morning's scouring. The afternoon sun splashed whitely on the steps down the street as far as the eye could see, counting off on its fingers the number of

well-kept homes. The marble steps along both sides of the street met in a blur of perspective in the distance; they were almost like white keys of a giant piano, so evenly were they spaced.

The white door of his house, ornamented with his old brass nameplate and knocker, opened somberly and the ancient servant who had given Tobias every loyal breath of his life, stood there with tears frankly glistening on his shiny old black face. Behind him, and almost as old as he, stood Mrs. Humphrey, who had been Tobias' housekeeper as long as anybody could remember. There were no tears on her face; instead there was a stony unfriendliness to everything in Tobias' life, except Tobias himself.

It was a spacious hall, and somehow Tobias had managed to give it the look of a ship's saloon rather than the entrance to a house. Stairs divided and went up on either side, parting around a huge figurehead from the first ship Tobias Phelps ever had built in his shipyard. It was one of the earliest figureheads of William Rush, who had been Tobias' friend and contemporary, from the days when they were both boys in love with ships and sailing. It was a small figurehead, being only about nine feet tall, because Tobias' first ship had not been a great one, but only the best he could afford. Here it dwarfed everything that came near it; it made the present somehow puny and unimportant compared with the fabulous past; Tobias' children all hated it. Eliza hated it particularly because she always felt that it solidified and uttered all that was most cantankerous and obstinate and virtuous of her father's convictions.

It was not even one of William Rush's best works, for naturally he had made it when he was young. But it had about it a crude, heavy, brooding grace which made you breathe fast with a strange homage and homesickness for things you never had known, but only felt in your blood. It was too big and too conspicuous to be brushed aside as an amusing old-fashioned whim, and as long as Eliza could remember she had been embarrassed about it. She made up her mind as she entered the hall this afternoon, that the first thing "the children" would do would be to remodel the house, remodel it entirely for the sake of evicting the William Rush archangel. It was not an archangel, actually. It was Moses himself, the hard-working old patriarch with sorrow and vision grooved upon his face.

Perhaps they could even present it to the city, as several other of William Rush's monstrosities had been presented. Yes, that would be a fine idea. It could stand in a park somewhere, just as that shameless "Nymph and the Swan" stood in Centre Square. In a swift flash Eliza saw them presenting it to the city, a bunting-draped bandstand, and somebody . . . Horace, probably, yes it would be Horace . . . making a speech about this figure of Moses which had been on his father's first ship. One comforting thing about whatever was awkward in life: after the period had finally passed, it quite likely became quaint. She saw how it might very easily become a legend that Tobias Phelps had placed Moses on the prow of his first ship, passing through the Red Sea of commerce, as he used to say. Moses leading the children of Israel into the land of prosperity and promise. It could sound very substantial and respectable, as Horace would tell it in his presentation speech to the city. It would remind all their contemporaries and the snippy upstart families, whose sons needed to be reminded of such things if the three Stacey girls were going to be married creditably, that the Phelps fortune was an old and honorable one. It was so fashionable to have an old and honorable fortune in Philadelphia.

They went upstairs; it was characteristic of the Stacey family that they did not divide and go up, but followed Eliza obediently, bobbing along behind her. Trumbull, like a dapper rooster, brought up the rear.

Tobias' old-fashioned sitting room, as he had always insisted on calling it, was at the front of the house on the second floor, a green plush room, old and worn and very pleasant. There were models of his old ships standing about with never an atom of dust to be found on them. There were Tobias' books, because he had been a great reader in the days when most men learned from experience rather than from other men's words. A plain deal table stood at one side of the room, with tavern chairs pulled around it, where Tobias and his old business associates had sat for conferences. Tobias had outsat many of them; for generations of business had come and gone, and new generations had taken their places. Scattered about the room were old maps and charts with the meaning long died out of them, and two sturdy sea chests which had traveled the world with him when he was young.

People said this was the only room in Philadelphia, which after all was one of the great ports of the earth, that smelled

of shipping. People said if a blind man were brought into this room he would believe he was in Ipswich or Salem, or even down along the Battery in New York in some of those tall narrow rooms where you could smell sea winds and spices and the casks of old Madeira. There had been salty nights in this room and far-flung tropical sea talk. But it was all imagination, Eliza said angrily to herself, that you could "smell shipping" here. As if thought had an odor!

There was a discreet disturbance below in the street, and they knew that another of Tobias' children and his family had arrived. Trumbull looked out the window.

"It's Horace," he said. It was significant that though five persons were alighting from that landau, one would say, "It's Horace." The three "girls," as Marianne, Bess, and Faith were always called, peered out the window, as arch as herons standing on one leg. They made little chattering noises of pleasure, for they were very fond of their Uncle Horace, and even of Aunt Harriet. But mostly it was Horace they liked, since he was masculine and big and substantial.

Horace was an impatient man, who didn't like to be kept waiting for anything. He moved nervously, and this was strange in such a big and solid body. Now he straightened his tall hat, flicked his black gloves over each cuff in a deliberate slap, and then turned and gave his hand to Harriet, who was creaking with mourning elegance, quivering and winking with jet from the top of her bonnet to the hem of her stiff taffeta gown. Harriet could always be depended upon to reinforce Horace's dignity, at least in public, for she threw all her handsomeness into the scales on his side of any scene. Behind her the three children appeared, rather vague-faced offspring to have been produced by two such strong parents. Two sons and a daughter, notched in between the Stacey children. This proportion of the sexes never failed to please Horace whenever he thought of the three doughy daughters of his sister Eliza.

Horace's family had barely entered the library, borne on soft murmurs of solicitude and commiseration, when they heard Stephen's carriage arriving. Once again the three Stacey girls fluttered to the windows and looked out. They shrieked in little whispers:

"Uncle Stephen . . . it's Uncle Stephen and Aunt Amoret!"

They adored calling Amoret "aunt." Last year she had

been four years younger than the youngest of them, and they had hated and feared her. But this year she was safely married into the family and removed forever from popularity and competition, and they loved her dearly. You could feel they hoped that now there was some necromantic "family resemblance" between them all.

Even Eliza now permitted herself to look out the window, as her younger brother and his bride came across the broad pavement. Under Amoret's correct little black bonnet, Eliza could see the bright assault of her beautiful hair. It seemed audacious and indecent with a mourning costume. . . . You could see her quickly look up at her husband as he said something to her, and a dimple, quick as a word, pricked her cheek beside her mouth. Eliza scowled reprovingly. They must know that neighbors would be watching from windows. Yet there was Amoret coming in, smiling and twittering like a bride on her way to a ball. It was most inappropriate. Eliza found almost everything Amoret did shockingly inappropriate, because she was shockingly pretty. It was hard for a fat woman with three homely daughters to forgive her for that!

The room was full of Phelps now, all distinctive people, and yet all concentric around old Tobias. It had been so in life, and it would probably continue in death. He was a vortex, that old man; other peoples' lives whirled and eddied around him whether they liked it or not. The persons in the room had almost a sense that Tobias was present among them; of the twelve Amoret was the one who most wished this actually were so. The other eleven had drawn together in a clot of commiseration and consolation, but Amoret stood apart and hardly knew how she had become separated. The others were unctuously murmuring in appropriate whispers, each consoling the others, all carefully avoiding any reference to the reason they were gathered here. But Amoret was standing beside the fireplace, with her hand on the old shabby wooden chair which was almost a portrait of Tobias. It was a stiff, straight-backed wooden chair almost as forthright as Tobias himself had been. Angular and uncompromising, it was a chair which would hold a man upright as a man would hold his convictions.

Beside it was a rough little home-made table, which had followed Tobias from his far-away boyhood. On this lay a

pipe and a big book, well-worn. A footstool, faithful as an old dog, waited beside the empty chair. Amoret, looking down at this expressive group which had become familiar and beloved to her during the months in which she had known Tobias, felt sudden warm tears prickling inside her eyelids. She wanted to sink down on the footstool and weep for loneliness and grief, because her friend had died.

She had sat on this footstool many times, talking with Tobias. He had been an old man, but he had never seemed old to her. Wrapped in his frayed plaid woolen shawl pinned across his chest he had looked like a roguish boy made up for a play. He said he wore the shawl pinned across his chest to hold his cough inside. His body had been old and feeble because it had lived a long hard life, but his mind was not old; his mind was a vigorous strong instrument, grown sharper by the hard use of the years.

"One difference between minds and bodies, Amoret," the old man had said. "Bodies get weaker from use, but minds get stronger! Don't forget that." He had said many, many things to her. She remembered the words; the sense some day would come to her. It was something like banknotes. They were little oblongs of paper; you saved them, and some day they became gowns, or dinner parties, or riding horses. Words were like that. You saved them, and when you needed them, they expanded into living. She remembered Tobias' words and laid them away until the day she needed to understand them.

But now, when one was eighteen and newly married, one did not need to think about words. One thought in other ways . . . with one's eyes and one's lips, and the feel of a strong man's arms. One lived the life of the beloved body now, and later, say when a woman was forty like Harriet, the life inside the head became important.

Stephen, seeing her standing so thoughtfully beside his father's old chair, as if she and it were somehow a minority group in this room, came over protectingly and took her back into the family. They all seated themselves now, in segregated little groups by unspoken arrangement. Eliza and her four subsidiaries, Horace and his four, and then, a little apart, Stephen and Amoret.

Benjamin Van Dyke had left them alone; no doubt some legal etiquette. But now, on the stroke of three, they heard

the door open down the hall, and he came in, a chill discreet expression on his face. He was walking cautiously on the balls of his feet. Benjamin had been the parenthesis of caution in all Tobias' affairs.

Tobias had been the shout; Benjamin was the whisper that made the shout somehow orderly and coherent.

He looked around the room, summing up the attendance with quick mathematics of the eye. That eye gave only a flicker of special recognition to Amoret, who had been his legal ward almost since she was a baby. But they had never known each other, except by prim, dutiful letters, for he was a rock-ribbed bachelor who had no aptitude for children. He had tried to perform his legal duties in stretching out her small pittance of an inheritance to last until he could get her safely married. That was about all she had ever meant to him, a problem which he had solved judiciously as he tried to solve everything.

He went over to Tobias' old desk, significantly cleared now to make room for the one important document, the will. You could see by the way the portfolio was tucked under his gloomy gray coat-sleeve, that the will was in it. He put on big spectacles, cleared his throat and then poured himself a glass of water from the silver pitcher set on a tray in readiness for this moment. Horace stirred impatiently in his chair, and Harriet sent him the balm of "one of her looks." Eliza dabbed one final time at her mouth and then at her eyes. The Stacey girls fluttered as if from an invisible breeze. All was in readiness for the first words.

"You . . . ahem . . . are the heirs of Tobias Phelps?" began Benjamin Van Dyke, rather redundantly.

Horace sputtered with annoyance, "You know we are, Benjamin. You've known all of us since we were infants! Let's dispense with the formalities."

Van Dyke looked at him with patient firmness. "Your father was a very orderly man, Mr. Horace. You must permit me to do this in the way he would want it done."

Horace, irritated, acknowledged this with a grudging gesture of consent, and Harriet reached out her hand and touched his knee soothingly. The lawyer, his blue-veined hands slightly trembling, opened the portfolio, took out the document and broke the red seals on the will. He began slowly to read.

"I, the undersigned, Tobias Phelps, being of sound mind . . . etc. . . . etc. . . ." He fluttered through the legal verbiage in a mumble. Everyone sat alert and expectant; eagerness was etched on each face according to its nature. Harriet's common, pleasant face was amiable and interested; Horace was sardonic, amused, and impatient; his younger son, a boy of seventeen, looked greedy and pale; his daughter was fashionably blank; the older son, who did everything he saw his father do, was a caricature of superiority. Eliza's face was buttered over with a saccharine grief that did not quite hide craftiness. Marianne, Bess, and Faith, always as one, seemed sympathetic and coy, ready to leap nimbly in any indicated direction. Amoret, brought up to believe that everyone would take care of her in the pleasantest possible way, looked tranquil and pretty, and her husband, the flower of the whole family, was aloof yet courteously attentive.

In the whole room, there was only one face that showed acute tenseness. That was the face of Trumbull Stacey, who had been a minor partner in Tobias' enterprises ever since his marriage to Eliza. His face now was gray, and he looked as if he were going to be violently ill. His hands, small and immaculate, twitched on his knees.

Everyone in the room was hearing the words, but nobody was really paying too much attention to them; the dates, the places, the authentic legal language all blurred into a background of properness. For the Phelps family all the events of their lives had always been held up by this scaffolding of propriety.

Suddenly then, Van Dyke raised his voice and let it quicken into a new tempo to indicate that now they had passed beyond the safe harbor of legal usage, and were out in the choppy sea of Tobias' own originality. Anything might happen out here, for this was bold water, uncharted.

"To each of my children I have bequeathed the richest legacy ever offered by the world; to wit, America. Poor and friendless my ancestors crossed an ocean to a land that offered them new hope. Abandoning all else, they were married to this land, this stern land which guaranteed nothing, and yet made possible all. Those who were sluggards wilted and died, for the land was hard.

"My father fought a war; his sons made a wilderness blossom with a city, so that my children might have America for their home and for their destiny."

The lawyer's voice trembled. Horace interrupted again, red-faced with embarrassment because his father, whose pomposity and emotion had always embarrassed him, was now having his say uninterrupted. Swift angry remembrances flashed over Horace . . . banquet speeches . . . afternoons at their club . . . groups gathered around the sideboard of a hunt breakfast . . . and through them all Horace squirming in a perspiration of humiliation because his father, handsome and broken and old, was emphasizing that background of hardship over which he had triumphed. It was an old familiar pattern with Horace, for it had been his father's life-long theme. His father's theme, and his children's curse, this uncomfortable seizing of every opportunity to speak eloquently of pioneering to a group of aristocrats who wanted to forget that their superstructure of ease had been painfully built by the aching backs and the tautened brains of men like Tobias.

All through his life it had been an awkwardness and a tedium to Horace, something his colleagues slyly twitted him about. And here it was now popping up again as his father's last words. Yes, at the end he had guaranteed himself the last word, no doubt accurately picturing his children forced by their own self-interest to sit through it and listen, before they could hear what their father had provided for their future. Horace could imagine the old man chuckling to himself as he had dictated all this bombastic rhetoric to his lawyer.

"Can't we read all that later, Van Dyke? We've all heard father on that subject! Many times! Let's get down to the business part of the will. The bequests."

Everyone appeared dutifully shocked at this outburst. Mr. Van Dyke looked up. His old hazel eyes clouded over a minute, then he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Horace. These *are* the bequests."

Horace conceded wearily, with that characteristic flip of his heavy hand which always implied that he and his brain traveled at a much faster pace than other ordinary people and their plodding mentalities. The lawyer went on.

"Let me see, where was I? . . . oh, yes, 'destiny. All the sum of my seventy-six years of vigor, industry, and effort, I bequeath to my children.'"

Horace settled back comfortably then, and looked with gratification at his sister and brother. Stephen, tolerant because he was young, thought all this choleric impatience of Horace very tiresome. There was never any need to rush at

things the way poor old Horace wanted to. Everything came in its own time, and the outcome was generally better than you could really expect. That had been his experience through his education and for three years now as the owner of the country seat which was the show place of Pennsylvania. Everything came in time, and you occupied yourself pleasantly while it matured. He knew that at twenty-five. But his elder brother at forty-five had never seemed to learn it. His brother had lived his life wrestling and wrangling every step of the way. Strange, wasn't it?

And yet, not incomprehensible, for they belonged to different epochs, the two of them. Horace was the bridge from the hard-working builders to Stephen, while he himself was the first of the new order in his family, the men who would live gracefully and fearlessly in a country which had now borne its fruit. Horace was so close to the hardship era that it made him self-conscious and uncomfortable to hear it mentioned; Stephen was so far removed from it that he found it a bit quaint and picturesque.

Van Dyke, maddeningly deliberate, took another sip of water before he resumed reading.

"To my son, Horace, I do will and bequeath my common sense, which has deprived me of much joy. In addition to this, he has inherited from me my hardness of heart, to be used in business matters, as long as he sees fit, and to be softened, as mine was softened, by due process of events."

The words fell into the room like stones upon a floor. Horace was apoplectic. "What the devil does all that mean?" he shouted. "Skip all that nonsense. Get down to the property part, Van Dyke. We know my father was old and eccentric. He had to give his last nasty scolding, naturally . . . he never could get it through his head that I was a man just as capable as he was, even with all his high-falutin' talk . . ." Horace choked with rage. Then he calmed himself almost as visibly as if his temper were something outside himself, like a mad-dened animal. He spoke now quite quietly. "Let's get down to business, Mr. Van Dyke."

But this time Van Dyke did not raise his eyes from the document. He waited for the wild animal to be calmed, then he went on reading nervously. Horace was still sitting on the edge of his chair, red-faced and popping, looking like a toad about to burst with anger and blood.

"To my daughter Eliza, I leave my excellent digestion, and the warning not to overtax that gift. Which warning, being my daughter, she will ignore, until Nature thrusts it upon her."

Eliza gave a little scream as though she had been irreverently prodded with a pin in her rear. She quivered with rage in all her chins and billows, staggering to reach an equilibrium of womanly delicacy. Then she nearly fainted at the vulgarity. Her children swarmed around her, and Marianne, always adept with comfort, whisked out a little green bottle of smelling salts and held it before her mother's convulsed face. Eliza angrily swept it away, sniffing and snorting like a horse.

Van Dyke, well-manneredly blind and deaf, stood with his eyelids discreetly dropped, waiting for the horrified echoes of Tobias' words to subside. Finally he went on in a strained voice.

"To my youngest son, Stephen, I leave all my estate, both real and personal."

This sentence ripped across the tumult like a bolt of lightning; it left every face livid and stunned as lightning will make faces appear to be italics in the dark. Horace recovered first.

"He can't do that," he shouted, nearly choking. "Stephen's never accomplished anything in his whole life. All his twenty-five years, he's been nothing but an extravagance. He made a fool of my father . . . He got everything he wanted . . . every indulgence, every whim . . . He simply can't do this!"

Van Dyke, brandishing his voice like a sharp weapon, cut through the noise and made himself heard. "To continue . . . both real and personal. The real he will find somewhere in my residence, wherever I have used it last. To wit, a book."

"A book!" Horace shouted. "Must be some kind of a listing of holdings."

Van Dyke, pale and determined now, sawed along relentlessly.

"The personal estate he will find consisting of a packet of papers."

"Papers? Stocks and bonds, no doubt," Horace croaked hoarsely. "The mortgage on my New York property, probably . . . and those notes of mine father held . . . I'll not have that young whelp holding those over me . . ."

Horace was on his feet now, glaring menacingly at Stephen, who was no longer relaxed in his chair in his usual graceful attitude. Now Stephen, too, was alert and tense. Van Dyke said, "You must control yourself, Mr. Horace. This is painful for all of us."

"The old man was dotty," Horace said. "He was full of daffy notions. Treated his laborers like kings. He wasn't fit to run his business. Wouldn't use child labor in the North; wouldn't own any slaves . . . Now I know! The old man had lost his mind . . . he'd gone soft in the head."

Eliza and the other women were weeping hysterically. Harriet didn't know quite why she was weeping, for whimpering had never been her response to anything, except as a way to play for time. As on many occasions before in her life, she fell back on a conventional female gesture while her rather masculine mind was grinding away dispassionately, trying to sort out what was happening, and make some advantage of it.

But Amoret was not crying; she was looking on in bewilderment, unable to follow any of this. She was sure it must all be some misunderstanding, which eventually the men in the group would straighten out and explain to each other, the way men did. It couldn't be any real catastrophe, for her father-in-law was the kindest man who had ever lived, and he wanted only to make his children happy and secure, and to have them enjoy the fruits of his labor. This whole week had been full of sadness and confusion, and she knew that Tobias would have prevented it all if he could. He so loved to make people happy; it would have made him very sad indeed to know that he was powerless to prevent all this ugliness and disagreeableness just because the time had come when he had to die. She looked over at the chair where he had sat so many times.

The sun was shining on it, the cold late afternoon sun, and a bleak spidery shadow of its rungs and slats lay along the floor. The chair looked aloof and lonely, and once again Amoret almost rose and ran to it, to put her arms around it and caress it, as she had caressed Tobias. She wished Tobias had asked that only the men of the family meet to hear the reading of this baffling paper. Tobias was such a chivalrous man; he never wanted anybody to be unhappy, particularly women. Business was certainly something for men to worry about. She realized then that she was sitting upright,

with her face calm and lifted to her thoughts, while all the other women in the room were crying and crumpled.

And yet that was strange, because without any sense of superiority, she knew quite surely that of all the persons in the room, she was the one who had loved Tobias best. It showed, rather terrifyingly, that you must not judge by appearances. If you came into this room, a stranger, and looked at this group of people you would certainly misjudge the whole situation. That gave her a frightening, forlorn feeling; she put out her hand quickly and touched her husband. A woman was supposed to have a big clever man to depend on. Thank heaven, she had Stephen. He would take care of her and explain to her what she needed to know, and straighten everything out and make it simple and safe.

Horace was screaming angrily now, "I can prove he was dotty. I'll fight this through every court in the country. I'll break the will."

Mr. Van Dyke said, with something very like pain crackling in his voice, "That won't be necessary, Mr. Horace."

"What do you mean? I'll take it to the Supreme Court."

"There is nothing to take, I am afraid."

Silence like a clap of thunder echoed from this.

"Let me see a list of those stocks and bonds," Horace said in a threatening whisper. He was pulling at his stock now, and his neck, red and raw-looking, was throbbing rather terrifyingly. Another throb pulsed in his temple.

"There are no stocks and bonds . . . no securities at all. Your father's holdings have been liquidated," Van Dyke said.

"Liquidated! What are you talking about?" Horace cried.

"*Liquidated!* You're out of your mind." It was Eliza who said that. The business word was as incongruous on Eliza's lips, as if she had had to remove a stogie to speak it. Everyone in the room looked quickly at her, unable to believe what they had heard. But under that pudgy collection of circles which formed her flabby face was an angular shrewdness, shocking to see. For one naked moment one realized that the fat soft woman was only a costume worn by lean ugly avarice, gluttoned but insatiable.

"Your father died bankrupt," Van Dyke said. "He tried to help his friends, Mr. Horace . . . The last few weeks have been a nightmare for all of us . . . Mr. Stacey knows what it's been."

They looked dully at Trumbull, but nobody asked him any-

thing, for they never had considered Trumbull as more than an errand boy for their father. Van Dyke was haltingly trying to explain. Of all the people in the room, Horace was the only one really capable of understanding the full significance of the lawyer's words. But Horace was too shocked to grasp it. His mind felt like fingers of mist clutching and slipping and unable to hold on to the words he was hearing.

All this couldn't have happened at a more inconvenient time for Horace. For weeks now his own bank had been tottering in a temporarily unstable position. He had wanted to talk it over with his father, but the old man had been ill. Several times he had gone to see him, expecting to go into the matter, but each time when he looked into the lined old face, he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. Tobias had helped him many times before with loans or even with the mere weight of his name. But there was a strong stubborn pride in Horace, and whenever possible, he liked to get out of things by his own strength.

There had always been a kind of rivalry between them. Tobias was good-natured and condescending about his son's ability, and this nettled Horace, and always had from the time he was a small boy. He never had been able to understand that Tobias laughed at his strength only because he was proud of it, and wanted it to increase. Even when Horace was a child it had been like that. Tobias, a very strong man physically, had sometimes held one hand behind him, and had wrestled with his small son. No matter how long the wrestling had lasted, it had always ended by Tobias pinning the boy to the floor, and then letting him up and expecting the boy to shake hands and laugh and be pleased about it.

Every once in a while through the years, Tobias had wrestled again in some business clinch, and after he had pinned his son to the floor he had picked him up and brushed him off, and then had set him on a rung higher up on the financial scale.

Well, all that was finished now, for Tobias was dead. And if you could believe this puling, green-faced lawyer, his financial strength was dead, too. But that was simply preposterous. That was something intelligence and common sense and the experience of a lifetime rejected as fantastic and absurd. Nevertheless, Benjamin Van Dyke was going on drearily proving it with sentence after sentence. He was reading off lists of To-

bias' famous companies, shipping corporations, manufacturing companies, banking houses, and lists of liabilities which swamped assets.

Even to Horace's expert mind, the structure assumed almost pictorial simplicity. It was a honeycomb of pyramided credits and speculations. Only thin beeswax walls held the separate enterprises apart; each cell of the edifice was so heavily packed with the thick substance of indebtedness that finally one small cell had crumbled. The tower of beeswax had looked like an impressive edifice from without, but somewhere down at the base, one of the fragile walls had folded into itself, and then another and another, spreading in waves of ruin. Strength had been upheld by weakness; weakness collapsing had sucked strength down into the flowing ooze of ruin.

And there was Van Dyke saying something even more fantastic. "Your father won't be the only bankrupt man this year," Benjamin was saying. "There'll be many fortunes in this country that'll collapse when the news gets around. The country can't survive this fight between the government and the bankers . . . there isn't enough specie to cover the wild speculations . . . as soon as European houses begin demanding we pay up some of our credits . . . we're skating on the edge of ruin in this country . . ."

But the Phelps family had something more immediate to worry about than the threatened ruin of the country. That would take care of itself when the time came; right now, they had this nightmare to grapple with in this very room.

Eliza in her thin little bleat . . . the only thin thing about Eliza . . . was squeaking, "But what about the Lawrence mills? I own a great deal of stock in those mills . . . and the New Bedford company? Father gave Trumbull a big slice of that . . . what's become of that? And the cotton brokerage in New Orleans?" She couldn't go on.

"They're all gone," Van Dyke said heavily. "Everything went, trying to save something else."

"Things like that can't happen overnight," Eliza said in a whimper.

"No, of course not," Van Dyke said, and looked over at Trumbull for some corroboration.

"Mr. Phelps kept believing he could get it all back on its feet," Trumbull said, much too loudly. "But then he was ill.

He did everything he could . . . he wanted to talk to you people about it, but there wasn't time really . . . you mustn't blame him . . . I can't explain it, but . . ." Trumbull's voice trickled away now into silence.

Van Dyke had the papers there in the portfolio, a tidy long listing of names and figures, the incredible sum of a lifetime of success all adding up to a total of failure. Lists of figures that melted one into the next like icicles in sunshine. He passed around the records, and everyone looked dazedly at them, blinking blindly as if he could not even read intelligently. Even Amoret looked at them. But what Amoret saw was simply the lovely penmanship of Mr. Van Dyke's clerk. What neat-looking love letters he must write to his wife, Amoret thought, running her eyes up and down the pages. But she dismissed that thought guiltily, for she knew it was frivolous and unworthy. She tried dutifully to think of something more appropriate, but all she could produce was an anger and a loyal resentment, because Tobias' business nakedness was being so shamelessly scrutinized by his children.

"I have not quite finished reading the will," Van Dyke said gently. "There is a codicil to the will. I think we'd better hear that now."

He took another drink of water, and brushed his hand wearily across his forehead.

" "There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches." On this day, which must surely be near the end of my lifetime, I have written down this line quoted from my favorite Book because it speaks the sum of all the knowledge which I have learned from being rich and from being poor.

" 'I have spent my life actuated always by the intention to leave you, my children, a goodly share of this world's best. That lately has been taken from my hands. So now I must look for other riches to leave you, imperishable ones which nothing can take away from you. This, then, is the heritage I leave my youngest son, Stephen. You will find it if you look for it. From it you can build whatever life you choose. With it you can do for the future what the past has done for you.' "

The last words fell upon the room in a curious way. All the rest of the will had been read in a crisp monotone, but Benjamin read these words with an eloquence and simplicity which lifted the whole moment into a realm which ordinary smallness could not touch.

Through the years Tobias had incited in his family anger, pride, and respect. But also there had been in the old man a genius for arousing affection. This crushing weight of ruin had bruised the very air, and each person in the room would have to bear it and assimilate it in the years to come. But with all the knowledge and prescience of this, there came unexpectedly a warm quick thaw of love for the old man. He had been the underpinnings for this large unwieldy family. He had been like that small cell of beeswax about which had been built the towering magnificent edifice of this family. Whatever else they had thought about him, each had loved him in a separate, and often unwilling, way. The conventional grief of the last week so patently garbed in mourning and ceremony, the eulogies and obituaries, suddenly were wiped away, and here was honest grief and loss. There was not a person in the room who didn't wish suddenly that he could have back again just one hour when he could sit down with old Tobias Phelps and draw from that old life a heartening and a reassurance for whatever grim rebuilding lay ahead.

That, too, would pass in the next few weeks, and there would be blame and recrimination and bitterness and anger. But for these few minutes, at least, the room was stilled and filled with a silent psalm of love for the old man who had wronged them all by what he had lavished upon them and then at the last minute had had to take away. In this one unreasoning moment of loss, they knew only that they would never see him again, and that they would need him many times and would not have him.

They roused up now, and looked at each other in a stunned and sodden way. Nobody found anything adequate to say. So finally Van Dyke himself, to break the quietness, said, "I think there is nothing to be accomplished by continuing this. We'll go through the records and documents later, in any way you wish. I hope you'll accept the settling as painlessly as possible. Your country seat. I'm afraid, Mr. Stephen . . ." Van Dyke's voice broke on the chasm of incredibility into which he was briefly asking them to glance. Then he went on, "I know I need not tell this family that anything I ever can do personally to be of service, will be my pleasure and my debt. This is hardly the moment for a speech, but I'm sure all of you know in what affection and regard I hold my old friend."

Far from easing the moment, the awkward speech only made it more uncomfortable. It was Harriet who finally got to her feet, and straightened her bonnet. They all got up then, and it seemed as if every person in the room had aged ten years during the last painful hour. They straggled out of the room somehow, walking stiff-legged and slow, like persons who have just risen up from sickbeds.

Once again Amoret found herself separated from the rest. They walked out, not looking back at anything. Each one was encased in his own terrible mummifying emotion. But Amoret could not leave without going over once again to the old chair Tobias had loved. She stood there looking down at it, and there were tears in her eyes.

Van Dyke had gathered up his papers and had put them all back into the portfolio, buckling the big bronze catches and taking as long a time about it as he possibly could. He was watching Amoret over the tops of his glasses, and wondering dismally why he himself had never found time to get acquainted with her as had his old friend. Tobias had said, "There's a woman waiting in that child, Benjamin." But Benjamin had had few negotiations with either women or children. He came over and stood beside her, and he, too, touched the old chair, gently, as if it were flesh and bone. He said nothing.

"Do you suppose I could have this footstool?" Amoret asked him softly.

"The receivers won't be wanting that, I guess," Van Dyke said. He picked it up and handed it to her, and she held it in her arms as if it were an old pet dog.

"He was a wonderful man," Amoret said. "I know you knew that, Mr. Van Dyke. I don't understand anything about all this business. But even if I did understand it, I don't think it would change what I knew about him. He was a wonderful man."

Van Dyke said slowly, "If he had been only a little less wonderful! All this mightn't have happened. Understanding a man's business sometimes keeps you from understanding the man himself. Business often clouds over the real meaning of a man. Maybe you can see it more clearly than the rest of them. . . ."

"No, I wouldn't think that," she said quickly. "I didn't mean that, of course. I'm only an ignorant woman. . . ."

"There were things he could have done to save himself," Van Dyke said harshly. "He could have got himself out. There was time. There was time to shift and juggle and spread the loss around among a great many other people . . . other businesses than his . . . But that was never Tobias' way, Amoret."

She looked at him, trying desperately to follow what he was saying. But she knew only the essence of it. She knew only that he was asking her to translate this failure into what it really was, without having to follow through all the labyrinths of events.

"Things are going to be very bad in the next few months, Amoret. You will see men . . . honorable men . . . saving themselves and their skins by all kinds of clever quick dodgings and twistings, getting out from under responsibilities . . . I don't know what's going to happen. But I know that a great deal is going to collapse. . . ."

He had almost forgotten that he was talking to a fashionable, ignorant girl. He went back to the desk, and as he walked he took out his handkerchief again, and mopped his face. Amoret, still holding the footstool, went out of the room and down the hall to the ornate stairs in the core of the house. Below, like people in a dream, the rest of the family were huddled together walking along stiffly. She started slowly down the stairs, dragging one hand along the smooth rail.

The old figure of Moses looked down sadly on the hall, wise and inscrutable and brooding. The ship which this figurehead had led through the waters of commerce during Tobias' early days, was gone; the fortune which came from that ship and all its later sisters, was gone also. Only the meaning behind the brooding face of Moses remained. That was something which never could be stolen away, or go into bankruptcy. A quickening meaning, it waited in the very wood of the carving to be seen, and being seen, to become flesh in action. Only that, of all Tobias' fortune, was left now for the future to build upon. Perhaps that was what the old man had wanted to say in that strange codicil to his will.

In the afternoon gloom of the hall, Amoret stood with her eyes straining up to read the patriarch's face, down-bent in the shadow. For the first time in her life, she felt her young irresponsible mind as something alive in her—something new

that wanted to be born, that wanted to struggle up and stand erect, above her little prettiness, and even above her love for Stephen.

There was something reminiscent in the upward straining of her mind. For a moment she could not place it. Then she remembered. It was the row of espaliered peach trees this morning, reaching up toward heaven as if they were seeking their own buds. This morning she had felt an intimate symbolism in that. But then she had been thinking only of her body. The new passion, in its first spring, had not quite made her body come of age. Its twigs had never yet been suffused with the melting richness which formed buds . . . then flowers, then fruit.

And now, here in this hall, her mind also was straining upwards in the same way, reaching for some fruit which only it could grow, as the body itself must utter its own consummate bliss.

And could there be a bliss of mind . . . was that what Tobias knew, and wanted to leave for Stephen? No . . . it must be more than a bliss of mind. For Stephen had that already. He knew Italian and French . . . he understood the poetry of the Greeks . . . The irradiance that shone from old Tobias, like the meaning in the face of the figurehead which he loved, came not alone from the mind but from something deeper and higher. This was what he wanted his son to know. This was what he was trying to leave for a heritage. But where would Stephen find that . . . ?

She lifted her face again to the old Moses, and something in her asked like a loud cry. But the answer was a voice so still and small it formed no word.

She knew in a swift moment of wordless intuition that long after the shape of this bewildering, cataclysmic day had passed, this moment between her and Moses would endure. There was truth enough in this moment to spend a lifetime trying to understand. However she spent her life, from this day onward, there would be a quiet quest within her for the answer.

At the top of the staircase Van Dyke appeared. He came down softly, and once more he stood beside her, half-knowing what she was seeing in the carved face of the patriarch whom Tobias had loved.

"Your husband's inheritance, Mrs. Phelps," he said, deliber-

ately rejecting her own name which had been signed to so many school-girl letters to him, and speaking instead her new name, as if to remind her that there would be grown-up troubles ahead for her.

He held out to her a small, tattered packet of papers, a notebook with many handwritten leaves thrust in. Then he gave her the rest of the inheritance. It was the book she had seen many times on Tobias' reading table.

CHAPTER TWO

It was nearly twilight when Horace's landau, discreetly closed, drew up in front of his own house on Spruce Street. The ride from Washington Square had been a heavy experience. Nobody had had anything to say, for Papa, as Horace instantly became in his own carriage, was sitting with silence draped around him like a mantle. His head was sunk on his big barrel chest, and his breathing was heavy as the worries which were revolving and grinding like millstones in his head. The "children" were perched carefully; their neat black little behinds gripped the cushions like clothespins. They scarcely moved throughout the trip home. Only their eyes, all economical-looking small eyes inherited from their mother's side of the family, darted about in their faces, dipping up a shallow lookful of their father's face, and then their mother's face. Harriet's expression was as calm as a pudding. She smiled at the children, and once in a completely ambiguous gesture, she winked. But the wink was so far beside the point that it was not reassuring, for it only showed them how non-plussed she was by what had happened.

Sometimes Horace muttered to himself, and twisted his thick fingers in the watch-chain which spanned the vast bulge of his waistcoat. The clammy toad-colored throb in his temple still pulsed. Just before the carriage turned into Spruce Street, Harriet said impatiently:

"Pshaw, you make me sick, the whole kit and caboodle of you! Suppose we don't get any more money! We've always had enough, haven't we? The way I look at it, it's only Stephen that's got to change his way of living. Ain't that so, Mr. Phelps? And you always said it would be a good thing for him if he did have to get out and scratch a little for himself." The turbulent surface of Horace's face changed not a fraction; he was waiting to see if this woman of his made any sense, before he decided whether or not he was even listening to her. Her slate-colored eyes looked at him narrowly out of their shrewd lids, then she kept on talking. "Maybe this is just the old man's way of wakin' Stephen up! Maybe he's got

the money salted away somewhere and old Van Dyke will bring it out later. . . ."

"Don't talk rubbish, Hattie," Horace said gruffly, forgetting that he never addressed his wife by her first name before his children.

"Well, all right," she said, unabashed. "*Stephen's* ruined, then. And Eliza and Trumbull will have to do some scraping and cutting and managing, too. Won't hurt *them* a bit, either."

Horace made his rude dismissing gesture with his hand, and for once Harriet defied it.

"I will not keep quiet!" she said querulously as if he had spoken instead of flipping that insulting hand of his. "I will so speak, if I want to. Money isn't all there is to living. It's time some of the Phelps found it out. That's what I say."

"That's because you're an ignorant woman," Horace said rudely. "More ignorant than most women, God help the condition."

The carriage stopped, and the coachman leaped down quickly, as he always did in honor of Horace's impatience, and pulled open the door. Horace got out first, and this time, he didn't turn and assist his lady out. He went over to the steps, and mounted them heavily. The front door, that big oaken slab, opened at his very approach, and May, the silly housemaid, bobbed respectfully as she held it open. Horace stamped inside, and shoved his hat against her starched white bosom, saying not a word.

The sweet warm fragrance of fires in all the grates, and the heavy red roses on the table, and the rich texture of flavors from the foods ready in the kitchen, all blended to welcome them. The March night outside had been chilly, and had the peppery smell of fog and smoke; the warmth and security inside the house was so poignant a comfort that it brought quick, senseless tears to the eyes.

"Everything's ready, mum," May said in her effacing little blur of a whisper.

"What's that?" Harriet said, and then she remembered. "Oh . . . the dinner." She nodded curtly to the maid, who disappeared in a flutter of starched apron strings. They had all forgotten the dinner to which they had been committed, the hosts and the guests! Showed the precipice of gloom into which all twelve of them had plunged, Harriet thought, and

for the first time she was vaguely frightened, as if everyone . . . even the children . . . had perceived some looming menace which her eyes were too dim to catch.

May, chased by her apron strings, scampered out into the back realm of the house, where everything was at the point of readiness for the big dinner. They had worked furiously all day toward this climax, and now she could feel that something was wrong.

"Something's happened to his nibs," she said to Hannah in the pantry. "He looks like he's going to pop wide open. And none of the rest of 'em ain't arrived."

Hannah, who spent her life in this house trying to flatten out the molehills of excitement which May was always scaling like mountains, said, "Let 'im pop wide open for all of me! He looks like he was going to pop about every other night when he comes home."

"This is somethin' different," May said. "And the rest of the Phelpses ain't with 'em."

"Well, whatever it is," Mrs. Shamey, the second cook said, "these here ducks won't be improved by settin'. A duck is something you got to serve when it's finished cookin'."

She flung up her huge haunches as she bent double to look into the dark yawn of the oven. "I can't be held responsible," she said belligerently to nobody in particular. "They'll have to eat them as they taste. Miz Phelps told me the time to have 'em ready, and that's all there is to it."

But it wasn't all there was to it; there was a great deal besides the overcooked ducks that was out of joint about this evening in the Phelps mansion. The "children" stood around the parlor awkwardly, not knowing just how to break away and take off their wraps. Earl and his big brother Stafford looked uncomfortably at their sister Annabelle, hoping she'd say something. But her face was pinched and cold, and her mouth felt full of teeth. Usually Annabelle, who was eighteen and her father's favorite, could be counted on. She hadn't much sense, but she was good-natured, and her greatest worry was her beaky nose which seemed permanently straddled by a saddle of freckles (no matter how faithfully she slept with a poultice of buttermilk and tansy tied over it).

Finally their mother disposed of them, with a nervous clucking gesture of her hands, as if she were shooing chickens out of a dooryard.

"You run along upstairs, children," Harriet said. "I want to talk to your father."

"Poppa, you mustn't worry about things," Annabelle said in her piping little treble. "Mamma and we don't care, do we, Mamma? You've always given us everything we want, and we know you'll find a way to go on. . . ."

Horace threw his arm roughly around her shoulders, and grunted something. He was touched by this rallying of his children and his wife, but that didn't relieve his own stunned depression about the day. He still was at the point of not believing it could have happened. Why, if it was true, he'd have *smelled* it! And yet . . . probably his father didn't smell anything wrong with *his* business. . . .

The children tiptoed out of the room, and trooped up the long black walnut stairs. Harriet, left alone with her husband, felt a confusion and fear she never had known before. This man, this bulwark of strength and stubbornness behind which she had lived her life, looked suddenly weak and defeated to her. She was afraid that if he started to talk to her about his fears and uncertainties, she would disgrace herself. For the first time in her life she wanted to weep, from within the very core of her being. Weeping had always been a device on the outer rim of her behavior, but now it seethed like centrifugal force holding her together by its very whirling. To steady herself, she took off her bonnet, her mitts and her ankle-length wrapping cloak, and even while she was doing that, she efficiently kicked a little footstool into position before the big green velour chair where Horace liked to sit.

"Mr. Phelps," she said vigorously, "sit down here and warm yourself. All this talk and nonsense . . . everybody running around making words about something nobody understands . . . what we need is to have you quietly think about things. I know you'll make them all right."

She patted him heartily on his black broadcloth shoulder, but she could not quite meet his eyes for fear she would see in them what she knew must be there.

"I'll go out and speak to those wenches in the kitchen," she said cheerfully.

She hoped this would remind him that the back of the house had been convulsed all day with the preparation of his handsome dinner for his relatives. But he was quite beyond remembering, and that only tightened Harriet's fear another

pinching notch. He sat down in the chair heavily, his legs in their beautiful skin-tight trousers sticking straight out before him. His head was sunk on the rim of his high stock, as it had been in the landau. Harriet, rustling in her taffeta like an autumn breeze, sounded infinitely more cheerful than she felt.

She said to herself, "What a body needs is something to *do!*" She clasped her hands tightly across her stomach to keep them from trembling. Behind the heavy folding doors, the dining room, only slightly less blazing with elegance than the parlor, stretched before her. Every rim of light quivered and wavered as she looked at it because now her eyes were full of tears. These were tears with no utilitarian purpose as the other tears of her life had been. In the currency of her thrifty emotions, this was money thrown away.

The partridge-winged tablecloth stretched down the long length of the table, shimmering whitely and reflecting in pools of color the richness of silver, the red of Horace's roses, the splashes of yellow from the candles overhead. The table itself was a masterpiece of opulence, a huge still-life done in rich old master colors, the bronze of olives, the topaz of Harriet's apple jelly, the garnet of her quince, the russet leather of the crocodile-hided pineapples, made into two "artistic arrangements" with hothouse grapes and oranges and the sharp astonished green of limes. Twelve tall-backed chairs like effigies of the Phelps themselves, sat stiffly up and down the length and breadth of the table. The high sideboard, groaning with its weight of Phelps silver, had baskets of fruit and an epergne of sweetmeats and walnuts waiting as the epilogue to this manorial meal which now probably would never be eaten.

Straight through the dining room, her determined little heels rapping out her approach, she swept into the cool staidness of the pantry. Through the kitchen door she went, and suddenly stopped and flung her eye about the room with authority. Everyone working in the kitchen stopped with spoons upheld, cloth in hand, pitcher poised, and not a word to be said. Every eye was fastened on Harriet's face. The coachman, outrageously wearing his hat, was squatting on a stool. You could see he had just burst into the room with his account of the other Phelps families getting into their carriages and driving off in their own directions, forgetting all about this dinner.

"Mrs. Parker . . . Mrs. Shamey . . ." Harriet said in a commanding way, "get those things off the table. We'll have it set up for the family. Get the roses out of the dining room. We aren't having any dinner party tonight. . . ."

"Something's wrong, Mrs. Phelps?" Mrs. Shamey asked.

"Not with us," Harriet said valiantly. No use worrying these people whose welfare depended on the welfare of the front of the house. "Everything's all right with *this* house. But our relatives have had a very hard week, as you can imagine. Death is never easy to bear . . . and this doesn't seem quite the night we ought to have a dinner. Even a family dinner."

She went over to where the black iron roasting pans, almost as big as cradles, were sitting on the back of the stove. The glazed surfaces of the ducks looked burnished as fine rich maplewood. She plucked off a little curl of skin and popped it into her mouth, chewing it with relish.

"Delicious, Mrs. Shamey," she said. "These are delicious. You have them seasoned exactly right."

"Yes, mum. Thank you, mum," said Mrs. Shamey gratefully. Things couldn't be too bad with the family, if Miz Phelps could pay a compliment. "Will you be having the same menu, mum?"

Harriet looked around thoughtfully, considering. A company menu would only remind Horace of the bitter contrast between this night and what he had anticipated.

"No. Just serve a family dinner. Just serve anything you want. My, there's an awful lot of food here!" The girls, May and Hannah, and Mrs. Parker were already in the dining room, denuding the table which they had taken all afternoon to dress.

Harriet's knees felt better now; there was nothing like work to make a body feel like herself. She would be able to talk to Horace, to smooth out all this and make him see that it wasn't the end of the world. Men were such children! Suppose his father's fortune *had* vanished . . . what difference did it make? To Stephen and that pretty little wife of his, yes . . . But to Horace and to her, it really wouldn't matter too much. They'd get through, and the children would marry and the boys go into their father's bank, and when it was all over at the end, and she and Horace sat among a respectable display of grandchildren, they would think about tonight and how absurdly over-important it had seemed, and they would

pat each other's hands and laugh, and that would be that. It gave you confidence to run to the end of your life and look back on the present, sometimes; made things take the size they ought to be.

She liked money as well as anybody, she supposed. But not enough to ruin her life worryin' about it. She thought about the time before she had known anything about money, when she had been a young and beautiful girl (well, not really so beautiful as she pretended to remember!), and she wondered if actually she hadn't been better off then. If Horace had been a poor boy, the son of the man who ran the saddlery shop at the corner of the square on Seventh Street, where her mother's boarding house was located . . . if he had been *that* boy whom she almost married, they'd have had much the same kind of life between themselves, probably. It would all have been smaller, occupying less space, wearing fewer digits on every deal. But in the end, it wasn't how much money people had that made the difference. It was the juice of living that they managed to squeeze out of things. It was what went on inside of people, whether they laughed and loved and worried *together*, or belittled each other, as Eliza always belittled Trumbull. She tried to imagine what Horace would have been like if he had been the saddler's son. A man without money . . . a man who had to make himself pleasing to people . . .

To think of Horace without his money was as impossible as to think about him without his body, that solid granite body of his that so encased his spirit that you felt that it, too, must be granite within the granite.

She slid back the folding doors and went across the hall again and into the parlor, thinking she would sit down and say some of this to Horace, in a burst of that intimacy which she often thought about but which so seldom came to pass in the chilling climate of Horace's presence. But tonight she would have her say, and she knew with a widening of her ribs against her flesh, that Horace would be comforted by her irrational, warm-hearted woman talk.

But there was nobody in the parlor. Only the dent from the heavy granite body in the big green chair. Pshaw, he had probably only gone upstairs to the bathroom, she thought with wifely realism; Horace's kidneys always reacted to his

emotions. She ran out into the hall again, and up the stairs, without the sedateness which she had come to accept with the years.

All the doors in the upper hall were blind, for this was a family which lived behind closed doors, partly because of their native reticence, and partly because the house was never entirely warm, and always the heat had to be hoarded, so much to each room.

At the front of the house was the big bedchamber occupied by Horace and her. Its door was the most solid in the house; she stopped outside it and listened a moment, almost afraid to enter. Then she opened it resolutely. The fire laid on the hearth earlier in the afternoon had been lighted. It was the only light in the room, and it cast long-fingered shadows up the walls and across the ceiling. The room always had a pleasant geranium fragrance from her own cologne, and with it was mingled that homely intimate smell of a healthy male, unmistakable and indescribable. A woolen, leathery smell, laced with the fumes of good brandy, and rimmed with cigar smoke. To Horace's own individual odor was added the pungent, peppery prickle of his Maccabody snuff. She stood there for a moment, her heart beating against her stays, and then a voice spoke out of the darkness.

"Close the door, Hattie," the voice said grudgingly. It came from the bed, and she was afraid to go over near it. She was afraid, so she went over immediately, and no more nonsense from herself.

"Whatever are you doing, Mr. Phelps?" she said. The great whale-like figure was lying on its back squarely in the middle of the counterpane. He had his hands clasped behind his head, and he was staring up at the bed-curtains. His large black shoes violated the white virginity of the crocheted counterpane. It was an outrageous sight, and gave the full measure of the outrageousness of this day. In all his forty-five years, Horace had probably never once been horizontal between dawn and ten o'clock. And now here he was, fully clad, lying on top of the counterpane!

"I'll want a small grip packed," he said, as if he were continuing instructions which had already been given to her. "I'm going up to New York in the morning. I have some things to talk over with my friends, the Josephs brothers."

"Good," she said staunchly, as if she understood something about it. "Good. That's exactly what you ought to do, Mr. Phelps." As long as people were doing *something* you didn't need to worry too much about them. It was when they wavered, uncertain and perplexed, not knowing which way to turn, that you were thrown into a panic.

"If you see Trumbull Stacey," Horace said, "if he comes snooping around here trying to find out what I'm planning to do, I don't want you to tell him I've gone to New York."

"Of course not," Harriet said. "I wouldn't tell Trumbull Stacey anything. I doubt, however, if he'd have wits enough to ask me anything. You know, Horace, I just happened to be thinking about Trumbull," she said, lowering her voice craftily, hoping that the sound of it rather than any word which she could think of to say, would convey some implication from which Horace might concoct a helpful conclusion. She wanted to lay out the raw materials of suspicion and solution, as a mistress who cannot cook might lay out the ingredients of a fine mutton pie on her own kitchen table. Horace was an expert; from the ingredients, if he could just get his hands on them, he could very probably whip up something to save the day. That was a woman's work, really, to get thoughts ready for her husband to think. She didn't have to think them, of course; that would be presumptuous and forward in a woman. But she did have to get them ready for *him* to think.

"Suppose he just managed all this, so your father's fortune would kind of peter out, just about the time the old man died. What I mean is . . . suppose Trumbull Stacey . . ."

Horace dismissed this indignantly.

"I could never waste time supposing *anything* about Trumbull Stacey," Horace said. "If you're trying to suggest that he managed any skulduggery connected with the estate, which my father wouldn't see through . . ."

"I don't know," she said, basking in this spurious sense of confiding between them. At least for the moment it had built a little bridge of talk between her and Horace. "Stacey's not very clever," she said, "but he sometimes strikes me as being a very crafty little man. You don't suppose . . ."

"Rubbish," Horace said. "I'm not worrying about my father's estate."

"You're perfectly right, dear," she said, as she had said it a thousand times a year for the past twenty-four.

Then Horace added a sentence which struck into her courage like lightning, withering it to a cinder.

"It's my own affairs that I'm trying to hold together."

(2)

It wasn't until their brougham was actually turning into their own long drive, between the tall quills of their poplar trees, that Amoret remembered that this was the night they were supposed to have been dining with the Horace Phelps.

Nobody had said anything about it before they all separated at Tobias' doorstep, and each family drove away in its own carriage. Perhaps they had discussed it when they were all huddled together in the hall, deciding not to have the dinner tonight. She guessed maybe she just wouldn't mention it to her husband.

In the twilight within the brougham, Stephen's face seemed almost to shine with paleness. But his eyes, the brilliant whites and the luminous brown irises, had a bright excited look, like the glow people said came from belladonna which the actors of the American Theatre dropped in their eyes to make them flash over the footlights. His lips, too, were burning with excitement when he took off one of her black gloves and hungrily kissed each of her fingers. She wanted to say something adequate about this strange day, but not knowing how to speak, she only pressed his hand, and snuggled her shoulder against his side. A woman could say so much more to a man with her body than she ever could with her voice. . . .

Never had Stephen been more witty and charming than he was on that drive home out along the turnpike to Wide Acres.

"We've had quite enough depressing business," he said. "Let's forget the whole thing, darling. The only business which is ever important between you and me is happiness . . . and *this*," he said, fiercely drawing her toward him, and kissing her. It was a kiss with a fiery circumference. Her little bonnet, with the crimped black crepe roses tucked under the brim, was pushed back upon her curls with the completeness of the kiss.

Stephen, with his breath coming too fast, untied the wide black ribbons from under her chin, and took off the hat. Then, to steady himself because he had got a little out of hand, he put it on his own head, and made a simpering coy face at her. Being swept off his feet, and then recovering his composure by his playfulness, made him most appealing. A swift unexpected upsweeping of love in her almost unbalanced her own poise. So she recovered also by giving in to hilarious merriment. Then she stopped and sat up properly, wondering what the coachman would be thinking of them coming home from this sad occasion and romping like kittens in the carriage.

"You see, my pretty, it's not the thing itself that is either ridiculous or sublime, but what you do with the thing," he explained, taking off the bonnet and smoothing down his dark hair. "It is the same with events. They can seem terrifying, or we can wear them becomingly."

She was very serious now. "Are you talking about your father's will, Stephen?" she asked timidly.

"Bright girl!" he said. "Exactly what I *am* talking about. It can be either a will or a won't."

The pun sounded frivolous, but she understood that he made it only to hide his deep feeling. Besides, everyone had collections of choice puns these days, just as they had collections of rare snuff boxes, or antique musical instruments, or firearms, or ladies' fans.

"I thought from the way Mr. Van Dyke looked," Amoret said, diffident because she knew she wasn't really qualified to discuss business, "I thought from the way he *looked*, that he wanted us all to think it was pretty serious."

"Van Dyke wants everybody to think everything is serious," Stephen said. "That long face of his . . . it looks like a sad sigh walking around. Van Dyke is the sober side of any subject."

"I dare say we'll find a way of adjusting the whole thing so that five years from now everything will go on just about as it always has. After all, my father was no upstart financier. He wasn't like these bankers who make paper mills of their banks, printing notes on a cartload of borrowed silver, then having no specie to pay out on demand."

"No . . . I'm sure he wasn't," she said, though she hadn't the faintest idea what he meant by his words.

"There's such a lot of talk these days. The *Public Ledger* has been full of it. Nothing but business worries and banking troubles. Promoters selling worthless stocks; merchants piling up foreign debts . . . I'm pretty sick of the whole subject. It has become a perfect mania with some people."

She patted his hand admiringly. He crossed his legs, and swung his foot, then he spoke reassuringly.

"I'll go into the whole thing carefully during the next few days and see what we can do about it."

"I knew you would," she said, settling back happily against him. "I knew you'd find a way to make it comfortable and beautiful, because you always do."

"That's right, my darling," he said, kissing the palm of her hand. "You have faith in your husband; let him straighten everything out for you. Your business is to keep yourself pretty and adorable, and to be sure that you stay in love with me. Is that understood?"

"It is the whole sky over my head," Amoret said earnestly. Then she was unexpectedly overcome with shyness because without intention, she had said a poetic thing to her husband.

"The whole sky over your head," he repeated, much pleased. "What a pretty thing to say! You keep that sky over our heads. Then I shall keep a steady earth under our feet."

The smart staccato of the two horses' feet, brisk and rhythmic along the road, was a comfortable sound. For the first time that day, she felt quite at home in the moment and at peace. It had all been strange and upsetting, but this twilight inside the carriage, and the shadowy night flowing past the window, and her husband's warmth close at hand, was ordinary and blessed and safe.

"I have lost my father, Amoret. That's the one fact which cannot be changed," he said with sorrow in his voice. "The unimportant facts, such as the size of the estate, will try to seem important now. But we won't let them." His face relaxed its tension after a moment, and she could see him trying bravely to alter the mood for her.

"It all depends on the way facts are told . . . and on the way they are looked at. Reminds me of an article in the *Public Ledger* I read last night. The title said '495 lives lost in thunderstorm.'"

"No!" Amoret cried. "What a catastrophe! Those poor people."

"Exactly," he said, smiling indulgently down at her. "But when you read down through the column this is what you found: '495 cowbirds perched in a tree in the middle of a field down in Kentucky lost their lives a few weeks ago, when a bolt of lightning struck the tree!' You see! When you know all the facts, it isn't very much of a catastrophe! I feel sure that when we know all the facts about my father's estate and his will, we'll find that most of the tragedy and the loss is concerned with cowbirds, so to speak."

He mused on this quietly a few moments, and Amoret looked as intelligent as she could, although it was not clear to her how those lists of figures written in Mr. Van Dyke's clerk's wonderful hand could be compared with cowbirds.

But men understood so quickly things which were often quite obscure to women. And probably it was best that they were incomprehensible; women had other things on their minds, and that kept the world in a comfortable balance. Women and men were needed by each other, and it was to be that way forever.

"A very interesting fact that little story indicates," Stephen said, as respectfully as if he were talking to another man. "It pretty well refutes the doctrine that feathers are non-conductors of electric fluid."

She knew what *fluid* was because she had read about it on medicine boxes, especially on the boxes of Brandreth's pills which Miss Sophie Van Dyke had always kept on her bed table. The box promised hopefully that two pills a day would "keep the digestive fluids in salubrious circulation." But she had had no idea, up to now, that this electricity which men sometimes talked about, was a damp thing, like the digestive juices. "Well!" she thought to herself. "I learn something all the time."

The sight of their beautiful square mansion with the long graceful ellipse of road looped in front of it was most reassuring. The windows all across the front of the house, were pricked with lamplight, because it was one of Stephen's whims that when he drove up to his own house, he wanted a life of light to be shining out of it.

"I want the house always to look as if it expected me," he said to the housekeeper, old Mrs. Durkee, who had loved and spoiled him since he was a little boy. And indeed the house always did expect him, for he was, in the most intimate possible way, the house-master, alternately pleased and genial or

critical and demanding. But whatever was his mood, every servant in the house was devoted to conforming to it. Most men (Horace, for instance,) resided in their houses as if they were hotels. They gave orders and expected only to see the surface of fulfillment. But Stephen lived in his house as intimately as a man lives in a woman he loves. Stephen was married to his house, forming every mood and whim of it and bending it always to his own will and desires.

After three months Amoret was still the guest, the pampered beloved guest, for Stephen actually managed the place, inside as well as out. Eliza was scandalized by this arrangement, but Amoret knew that it was all right. Eliza expected that when the honeymoon was over, Amoret would gradually assume wifely responsibilities. Probably she would . . . but even if she didn't, it wouldn't matter, for Stephen did only what he loved to do, and what he loved to do, he did exceedingly well.

They always arrived at the house in a flurry of welcome. Mrs. Durkee herself and several houseboys were ranged on each side of the spacious hall, smiling and attentive.

"We didn't expect you and Mrs. Phelps until late tonight, Mr. Stephen," Mrs. Durkee said. "You told me . . . I understood this morning . . ."

"Quite," said Stephen. "But we changed our minds; Mrs. Phelps and I decided we'd rather dine at home. So here we are. I know you'll find something appropriate for a little dinner for the two of us."

"Oh, indeed we shall," Mrs. Durkee said. "There is always plenty in this house, Mr. Stephen. We'll have it ready immediately."

The house was warm and sweet as nobody else's house ever seemed to be. There were more fireplaces in it . . . and more fires burning than other people allowed themselves. Stephen had also several beautiful tile pillar stoves which he had brought from Europe when he returned from his Grand Tour. The very air in their house felt luxurious and silken, and always smelled delicious, for there were always flowers from their own greenhouses. Tuberoses, narcissuses, and freesias Stephen grew especially for cut flowers because he liked their incisive lemony fragrance about the house. Stephen was such an artist in everything he did; he made an art of ordinary living, just as he made an art of love and of being married.

They went up the white-railed stairs now, deep with the

pile of Turkish carpeting. Halfway up Amoret remembered that they had left in the carriage the package that Mr. Van Dyke had given her.

"The sum of his seventy-six years of working and living," Mr. Van Dyke had said. A sum so small that she could hold it in her own arms! "At least, the sum as far as the *eye* can see," Mr. Van Dyke had added earnestly. "But perhaps the eye is not what Tobias' life can be measured by. Perhaps there is another dimension to Tobias' life, which the eye cannot see."

What had he meant by that? Men said such strange things. If you were to understand them, you had to listen with ears you kept especially for that purpose . . . What an odd thing to be thinking! Ears kept especially for the purpose? Why, yes . . . that was exactly what Mr. Van Dyke had meant about "eyes."

She thought about it as she mounted the next few stair-steps. It came over her that this whole day had been like a long flight of stairs. Thinking went along on a certain level for days and days, and then, sometimes whether you wanted to or not, your mind went up higher, just as your feet mounted steps, a little at a time. This had been such a long up-flight, since morning. . . .

They were in their private sitting room now, and Stephen had closed the door and had turned and was looking down at her with that particularly ardent look in his eyes which he kept always for the closing of a door which left them in a room alone together.

"Come here, you little sweet-smelling bird," he said huskily. She crept into his arms and looked up into his face, and once again it struck her that his eyes were too excited tonight. Now the pupils had become tiny pin-pricks, pinched almost to the smallness of the dot under an exclamation point. His eyes were exclamation points in the page of emotion which she was not able to read.

"Put on something beautiful, Amoret," he said in a whisper. "I've had enough blackness for today. Be pink for me tonight."

He broke away from her suddenly, and laughed excitedly.

"You know, I've just had the most stunning ideal" he said. "You and I are going to have our ball tonight . . . our Meschianza!"

"Stephen, how *can* we! What are you talking about? The

cards are out for the eighteenth of May . . . how could we notify the guests . . . how could they arrive . . . ?”

He came back to her and took her face in his hot hands.

“There is only one guest for me,” he said passionately. “Little Amoret Phelps, my tantalizing angel with a halo of fourteen-carat curls. And below the halo two green eyes with devils of mischief in them. And around the eyes a Valentine face. Below the face, a heartful of love . . . only half-awake as yet. . . .”

He often composed amorous descriptions of her, but this was the first time he had dared one in lamplight, where he could see her face. He laughed with delight at her crimson blushing, and stood back and looked at her mercilessly. Then he bowed low before her, keeping his eyes fastened on her blushing face.

“I’ve invited a hundred couples to the ball,” he said. “A hundred men to admire you, and envy me . . . a hundred women to dance with while I defer the bliss of being alone with you.”

“But Stephen . . .”

“So tonight we shall have the ball. Without the other men and the other women. I will admire you . . . as if I were a hundred men. I will dance with you . . . as if you were a hundred women.”

He was trembling with excitement as he said it, and she felt almost afraid of him, for he was possessed by some desperate play-acting, which very easily could get out of his control.

He strode into her dressing room, and opened the painted doors of her wardrobe, and she heard her own rustling frocks swishing under his hand while he searched for what he wanted. He brought out the lovely Turkish costume and twirled it in his hand. The wide satin skirt, slashed daringly here and there to show the diaphanous Turkish trousers, swung out in star points.

“This is the night of the ball. You must be the most beautiful woman you ever have been.”

He pulled the bell cord for Millie, her maid. He was as hilarious now, as he had been passionate and ardent a few minutes ago.

“I shall give you one hour for dressing, milady,” he said. “And then Major John André will come to your door to take

you to the greatest ball ever held on this continent of America. The night will be May 18; the year will be 1778. Do you think you can find your way back? Never mind, Major André will come and take you back."

He closed the door after he went out, leaving her standing in the middle of the floor with the costume swooning across a chair. For a moment she didn't know what to do. Then, as people generally felt when Stephen's mood set a stage, she was caught up into his game. She would put on the dress and show him how beautiful she was going to be for the great ball. Happy excitement was welling up in her now, and she began quickly unbuttoning her bodice.

During that hour he performed miracles, for the same contagious enthusiasm which whipped her up into the game, lashed the whole house into a frenzy of activity, setting the stage for his mock ball.

The moment Amoret's door was opened at the knock of her partner, she sensed the festive atmosphere that had gripped the whole house. A tall handsome redcoat was standing outside her door, incredibly dashing in his white wig. There was gold braid, and satin breeches, and long silk stockings; but more than all this, there was romantic handsome maleness about him, the same in any century. He had in his hand two nosegays, the first a very formal one of white camellias surrounded by forget-me-nots, ready to be pinned to her tight jeweled breast. He bowed with elaborate ceremony as he presented her with this.

"With the compliments of Major John André," he said, bending low. He watched her fasten the corsage to her bosom, and then he said, his voice an intrusive, outrageous caress, "And this, Madame, is with the compliments of your lover."

With expert sureness, he parted the layers of jeweled tissue which formed the low-cut costume, and as if he were offering an invisible spray of rare flowers, he bestowed five kisses across her breast, a jesting tribute which tingled through her. A wave of warmth swept over her, but he pretended not to know it, and except for the mad impertinence of his eyes, he maintained the most correct ball behavior. He gave her his bent arm, and she slipped her hand through it, and they walked sedately down the stairs.

Throughout the house she could hear the rustling of prepa-

rations, feet running up and down the back stairs, tables being pushed about, and behind the closed doors of the great new ballroom, a violin whimpering its A to itself, as it got in tune. However had he done it all?

They stood now at the top of the stairs, above the entrance hall, and Stephen pretended to be greeting guests, "Good evening, Lieutenant Bygrove . . . and Miss Craig . . . how charming you look, Miss Craig . . . and Captain Cathcart . . . I bid you good evening . . . Captain Peters, and Miss Jarvis . . . how beautiful *you* are, my dear, especially with your double-chin showing! And is that a rat-tail hanging over your shoulder . . . oh, do pardon me, I see it is a curl."

He was enjoying himself hugely, delivering his audacities in a very serious way. After a few minutes he led her into the supper room, which was just outside the closed doors of the ballroom. The windows were like tall black mirrors, spangled with hundreds of lighted candles, their flames swaying and bowing, innumera-ly multiplied by the reflections. Why, even the lighting of these candles must have kept the servants running on tiptoe! However *had* he managed it? But once lighted, the candles would be spoiled for the real ball. Tomorrow he would have to give a duplicate order to the chandler's shop!

In the center of the large room, a lace-draped table had been placed, and on it Stephen had laid out his most formal solid silver settings, the beautiful silver plates and goblets of which he was so proud. But before he seated her at one of the two places set at the table he took her over to a tall window which looked out on the lawn above the river, which they could not see now.

"It is a little late for us to watch the tournament, my dear," he said, "but it is part of my magic, which I need not explain to you, that I can turn back the hours as I can turn ahead the weeks. So for a moment, I bid you look with me at the Tournament which is being held. In the Pavilion at the north sit the ladies of the Knights of the Blended Rose. You know them because the most beautiful of them all is you, yourself, my darling."

"Ah! I am both there . . . and here?" she said, falling into the spirit of the game.

"That touches upon the miracle of my love," he said. "Wherever you are, far away, riding in your carriage to the

dressmakers, sitting with your friends over some tea table, anywhere at all you may think you are . . . always, forever, during your whole lifetime . . . you also will be exactly where *I* am. Do you understand that? So, in the truest possible way, you will be both 'there' and also 'here.' Never forget that."

He turned then to the south and described that Pavilion to her. Then he interrupted his description of the bands and the fluttering trophies and the fanfare, for the Knights had arrived upon the field.

"Fourteen knights on fourteen black horses," he cried. "And among them, if you will look carefully, you will see your humble servant."

"By the same miracle," Amoret murmured, "you also . . . wherever *you* are . . . you, too, will be both there, and in my heart."

Impulsively she touched her breast above her heart, and Stephen very seriously bent and kissed the place. Then he described the Tournament, the pageantry and pomp, the chivalry and right royal royal buffoonery.

"And at the end," he concluded, "as cannot always be arranged by life, but is easily guaranteed by Art, there will be satisfaction for all. I myself will make the speech after the heralds have proclaimed the judgment. I announce that never anywhere on earth have there been such beautiful and noble and gracious ladies as these. And all the time I am describing their virtues and charms, I shall really be describing you. For all women only remind me to think about you."

"A very dangerous and confusing state of mind for you," she said with mock sternness, squeezing his arm happily.

He seated her at the table then and three of the house servants, hastily pressed into their costumes, served the supper. It was ordinary food lifted to banquet elegance by the serving. Only the wine was festive wine. The meat was the sliced white breasts of chicken from today's luncheon; the pudding was the coarse hearty dish probably prepared for the servants' dinner this night. But the wine was Stephen's best, chilled to its most exquisite bloom and bouquet.

Then, at the head of the procession of imaginary guests, they went with stately dignity into the ballroom. The rest of the thousand candles were blazing there. Even as Amoret and Stephen entered, the last of the candles were being lit at the far end of the room, and the servant couldn't quite scurry out

before he was caught in the hasty act. Sixty mirrors picked up Amoret and Stephen and multiplied them all down the length of the room, so that there were not two dancers in that ballroom, but a hundred and twenty; and all the women were beautiful, and all the men were madly in love.

In the orchestra's gallery, which was hung like a little gold crow's nest against one end of the room, were but two musicians. One of the gardeners was sawing away at a fiddle; and some other man who was probably one of the house servants, was galloping his hands over the piano. Only one wore the costume wig, for the wigs had not yet been delivered from the hairdresser, and this was no doubt only the sample. But they were playing away valiantly, and their thin music stretched down the length of the room like two narrow satin ribbons.

There were but the four of them in this vast festive place, and the two suspended against the wall did not seem real. Only Amoret and her husband were real, and they danced and danced through the hours. The two-man orchestra played until it nearly dropped, but still the dancing went on. Sometimes they rested while Stephen drank more wine and talked about those glorious days which this Meschianza was to commemorate. Stephen could make history seem very real; he told it dramatically, so that it came to life in your mind.

"You see, the British had made themselves very comfortable in Philadelphia. They had had a splendid winter, while the poor ragged Americans were scrambling about, trying to get together enough men and arms to fight.

"The occasion of this party of ours was that General Howe was being called back to England. Perhaps because he was too genial a man and knew how to live well. Men who know how to live well seldom know how to die easily. But be that as it may, the rout was being given in honor of him, and also, of course, as all parties are, it was being given to promote love and laughter and well-being. Major André and all the officers of Howe's staff had been entertained very lavishly by the Philadelphia Tories. This was the graceful way the British were paying back the hospitality of some of the people whom they were sent over here to subdue. A most piquant situation."

"Did the Philadelphians like the British?" Amoret asked naïvely.

"Aristocrats usually like other gentle people," Stephen said.

"There are invisible countries whose lines supersede the boundaries of geography. Blood and flesh and race are crude divisions; but real fellow-countrymen recognize each other by taste, and imagination, and heart."

"And this was happening to *some* Americans while *others* were fighting the British?" Amoret asked, trying to understand.

"It was," he said. "But in a somewhat complex way the ball was another kind of fighting. Let me tell you. People fight wars in their own way. Once a countrywoman delayed the British troops by feeding them pie . . . She fought the war with pie. Some of the good Philadelphians were fighting the war with another kind of pie, while they kept the British officers occupied with gaming and reveling and dancing. . . ."

"Tobias lived in Philadelphia then?"

"Of course."

"But where was he while all this was happening? Was he at the great party, too?" The moment the words were out she was sorry she had said them, for Stephen's eyes darkened when he thought about his father.

"No, he was not at the ball. My father fought the war in his own very direct way," he said after a silence. "My father was always a direct man, incapable of subterfuge. He was with Allan McLane, that fine fox-hunting rebel.

"Matter of fact, early in the morning . . . tomorrow morning in our make-believe . . . while the guests will be leaving here, there will be heard the distant rumbling of shots.

"What is that? . . . I'm frightened, Major André!' you will cry.

"It is nothing, my little one,' I shall say to you. 'It is probably some salute in our honor!'"

"But what will it be?" Amoret asked.

"It will be old Tobias, just seventeen years old, riding furiously through the countryside with his rebel friends. He will be attacking the outposts of the British. He has made crude explosives . . . iron kettles and brass pails full of gunpowder. A piece of rope for a fuse hangs out of them. He will light this wick and toss the explosive against the breastworks as he rides past. I can see him, can't you? . . . His fierce angry face . . . Yet behind the anger that sense of humor he always had, glittering in his eyes." Stephen's voice had a strange hushed

emotion in it now; it was stretched tight with feeling. "He'll say, 'Take that, you blasted Britisher . . . and here's another kettleful of hell for *you* . . . you people of Philadelphia having a ball while the rest of us are hungry and cold. . . .'

"No . . . Tobias wouldn't be at the ball, Amoret. He'll be outside the ball, hating it with all his heart. . . ."

His voice broke now with emotion. "He'll be boiling with hatred for the ball, and for the British who think they have subdued soft Americans with their charm and elegance and luxury. . . ."

In spite of herself, Amoret broke in, "Stephen . . . we are on the wrong side of the fight! You and I should never be *inside* at the ball! We should be *outside* with Tobias. . . ."

"No . . . that's the contradiction," Stephen cried with inexplicable anger. "He wanted his son some day to be inside. He was fighting all his life for that, Amoret. He suffered whatever he had to . . . and the other men like him . . . because he wanted this country to have ease and culture . . . and he wanted his son to be a part of that . . . his grandchildren. . . ."

His voice suddenly broke, and he couldn't go on. Then he said in a tense whisper, a shameful begging whisper, "Amoret . . . don't let anything thrust us outside again . . . My father fought to give us this life. . . ." He was incoherent now, but above his words, his fear blazed. "Nothing *could* happen to us . . . Old Van Dyke must be out of his mind!"

For the first time now, she understood that all this night's feverish frolic, all this play-acting, had been desperate bravado. Stephen was not nonchalant and sure! He was frightened to death. She saw it now. He had burned the candles meant for the ball, because in his heart he feared there would never be a ball! He would not order a thousand new candles tomorrow from the chandlers. . . .

Her throat was suddenly so dry she could not swallow. She looked up at him beseechingly. He passed his hand across his eyes, as though he were ill. Then he shook his head violently, as if the nagging weary whine of the dance music were a swarm of mosquitoes tormenting him. Across the glossily polished ballroom floor he strode to the middle, and spoke to the musicians.

"The ball is over. You may leave now," he called up to them. Their music broke off in the middle of its plaintive

thinness, and the men got up stiffly from their gilt chairs, and scraping and bowing awkwardly, they backed off the little balcony, and disappeared behind the velvet curtains.

Stephen stood there a moment, dazed in the appalling silence. The candles were burnt low now, and the room empty and echoing was incredibly macabre. Then he came back to Amoret. He looked down at her, and the mask of his helpless, unchosen passion had already slipped down to hide his face. As if against his own tired will, his hot hands unpinned the wilted corsage and dropped the flowers on the floor. They had no place now . . . no more symbols and playthings! His hands clutched at her shoulders, while his mouth was twisted in un-merry mirth.

Shamed and tragic, Amoret stood there trembling. She felt an ugly strength in his hands, so she looked up into his face, begging him with her eyes; but his were blinded by anger and despair and the vandalism which was no part of his love.

He gripped the square neck of the fragile frock and ripped it slowly apart. The minute sob of the silk echoed in the sad and silent room, and the hideousness happened sixty times in the mirrors.

"You'll never need this ball gown," he said brokenly. "I might as well tear it to pieces, Amoret. You may never need *any* gown for *any* ball. . . ."

"Stephen, please!" she cried, not begging him to spare her, but only to save himself from this agony.

Then a rough moan broke from him, and he dropped his head in sorrow on his chest.

"Forgive me, Amoret," he said, not meeting her eyes. "Forgive me. . . ."

He turned away from her, as if he could not bear to look at what he had done.

"Whatever happens to us, we'll still have love, won't we? Whatever they're going to take away from us . . . we'll have our love, won't we, Amoret . . . ?"

CHAPTER THREE

Horace heard about it while he was eating his late dinner in the snug warm dining room of the Carlton House in New York on Wednesday. Ordinarily Horace would have had his dinner served in his own private sitting room. But tonight after his long, hard trip up from Philadelphia on the noisy, dirty steam cars, with nothing but uncouth, expectorating men crowded around him, he felt the need of being among his own kind of people, substantial gentlemen with well-padded frames and well-padded affairs, and even a fashionably dressed woman for him to watch dining across the room.

He wanted to fill his mind with everything usual and orderly and well-established, for he had a disquieting premonition of wild insurrection threatened in events, as if the usual beams and joists of well-being were about to sag or snap. This womanish premonition annoyed him, for he was not a man to mix the masonry of thinking with the pastry-dough of emotion and fear.

But even while he was sitting there giving his attention to the excellent mutton and roast potatoes and Brussels sprouts which the Carlton House chef cooked so superlatively, the first syllables of the bad news came to him.

It was the name of Josephs which he heard first. At the next table were two paunchy men with long, sad faces. It was plain from their exteriors that their interiors were as disrupted and tumultuous as was Horace's own.

"The Josephs Brothers will never pull out of this . . . the second great blow in less than a year and a half," one said morosely.

"I went down and looked at it this afternoon. You never saw such ruin in your life. I declare it was worse than the Merchants' Exchange fire. Much worse."

The other man, obviously a quibbler, said, "Of course, that was a bigger catastrophe . . . seventeen blocks of buildings burned. . . ."

"But fire is something you can understand. Fire is some-

thing that *happens!*" The first man was carping in an unpleasant whine.

"Yes, I see what you mean. *This* just can't be explained."

"That's what I kept thinking. All the time I was looking at that mountain of rubbish, I kept thinking, 'Why, this is something that just couldn't happen!' But it *did* happen."

They sounded to Horace like two maniacs. They talked all around the thing without saying what on earth the catastrophe actually was. Finally he could stand it no more. He threw his heavy napkin down on the table and went over to where the two strangers sat.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said. "I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying. It happens I'm more than casually interested in the Josephs Brothers' Bank. . . ."

"My God, man . . . haven't you heard?" the smaller of the strangers said, owling at Horace incredulously.

"Of course I haven't heard or I shouldn't be asking you," Horace snapped.

"Why, the new bank building they were putting up down on Wall Street . . . near Hanover, you know . . . it collapsed yesterday."

"Collapsed? You mean they've gone bankrupt? That just isn't possible," Horace gasped.

"No, the building itself. You know they were erecting a fine big granite bank. It was going to be . . ."

"But what *happened?*" Horace cried. "Get on with it, can't you?"

"It f-fell in," one of the men stammered. "The granite walls just cracked and went to pieces like soda biscuits. You never saw such a sight in your life. It made such a noise . . . why, it shook the foundations of everything for blocks around."

The other man, eager to wedge his voice into the delicious telling of the horror, said, "I was in my own office over on Church Street . . . we heard it clean over there. I felt it right here under my waistcoat." He punched his rotund midriff, and his face with the two swollen-looking eyes ogled at Horace with indignant consternation.

Horace questioned them impatiently as long as they had any new facts to contribute. But when they began going over the same ground again and again, as people boastfully do who are claiming some small personal connection with what has become public news, he excused himself and went back

to his own table. He felt shaken and weak. He had seen the charred ruins after that night in December, fifteen months ago, when fire destroyed the very heart of Wall Street.

The Merchants' Exchange had been at that time the flower of the whole Street, a handsome building of Westchester marble. Even the stock board had been destroyed and, ever since, the Board of Brokers had had to meet in the hayloft of what had once been the stable behind the old home of the Jauncey family near William Street.

Everyone had rallied after that blow, even though the loss of eighteen millions of dollars worth of property had left many men ruined overnight. But rebuilding had been started immediately in a frenzy of loyalty and optimism. Everything was going well on the up-wave of Jackson's inflated prosperity; business was booming; the Western lands were selling at sky-rocketing prices and profits, and the least the Street could do was to rebuild in the spirit of the day, and as a gesture of their good faith.

The Josephs, with the blessing of the Rothschilds shining like a golden halo of foreign faith over them, required something really opulent to house their swelling business. They had been jubilant about the promise of the future, when last Horace had talked to them a few months ago. Their building was nearly finished; their credits were a pinnacle of magnificence towering to the sky. They were lending money everywhere . . . more extravagantly generous, even, than Nicholas Biddle, who had been financing speculations and enterprises farther and farther afield, since the deposits of public money had been withdrawn in President Jackson's war against Nick and the Second Bank of the United States.

The whole fabric of finance throughout the country had been stretched thinner and thinner, to cover more and more underwriting and borrowing and issuing of notes against dwindling specie. Everything looked so wonderful and prosperous on paper. But if anyone ever tried to reach behind the paper and grasp a handful of gold. . . . A crazy freakish happening like this building's collapse might arouse a landslide of public fright, Horace thought. His stomach turned over with nausea, and he quickly pushed back the dessert plate of apple dumpling he was gulping down without consciousness of taste.

He would go up stairs to his room, grab his warm traveling

shawl (a man in the feverish condition he was in might very easily catch his death of vapors!). He'd hire a hansom and drive to the Street and see what all this terrible talk was about.

The police had roped off the area all around the great pile of rubble, and Horace paid the driver to wait some blocks away from the scene. He went on foot, jostled by running, noisy paupers, always eager to enjoy a free sight of something terrible that happened to their betters.

"Hey, Moike . . . ain't you seen it yet?" one man running away from the scene shouted to a friend just approaching.

"Sure, I seen it. But I went home so me old woman could feed me some supper," Mike shouted back. "Terrible, ain't it?"

Whale-oil torches had been put up here and there. The whole thing was theatrical and lurid. It reminded Horace of a steel engraving he had once seen of the French Revolution, with wolf-like faces in the crowd, horrified and yet gleeful as people often are made by destruction.

The collapsed building itself was a heaving sea of stone, with broken granite and glass paralyzed in mid-motion like waves in a bad lithograph. Pillars jutted up here and there; door frames and carved marble lintels protruded crazily; and over everything lay the splintered blanket of the roof.

In the tattered light from the flares, faces were strained and demonic. In one corner was a group of religious fanatics holding services of prayer and exhortation.

A big drum was thumping barbarously; a horn was brassily braying a hymn, like a demented donkey. This stopped suddenly, as if someone had stuck the jackass with a pitchfork, and now a shabby baboon of a preacher mounted on a chair. His wild eye darted here and there commandingly, and then he shrieked:

"Repent, repent, you bankers, for the time is at hand!"

The rabble swept around him like a wave bristling with driftwood. The very word "banker" was full of dynamite in their brains, stacked like attics with the inflammable debris of envy and poverty and avarice. Ever since Andrew Jackson had aroused suspicion of the banks by his very act of attempting to make them safer, the common people had been arrayed against the bankers of the country. The same people

who would ultimately suffer the most if Jackson's headstrong blundering finally did pull down the financial structure of the country into a debacle of chaos, Horace thought, were now running about chanting his name as if he were their savior.

Just as the common people had seized upon Jackson's name as a kind of magic wand to wave over their ignorance and slackness, to transform it somehow into prosperity and ambition and fortunateness, so Horace, and many men like him, in their apprehension and worry, had focused their fear and rage upon that same Jackson, attributing to him almost superhuman powers for working havoc. Now, as Horace watched this crowd, his mind seethed with hatred against that one vigorous man, whom he had never actually seen, but whose deeds he felt as an itching, needling skin eruption irking every hour of his business life.

Jackson had been out of the White House only ten days, Horace thought bitterly, and the walls of the country which he had pulled loose, and then had pretended to hold up by his own bare efforts, were beginning to crumble. Already it was clear what chaos that man had caused and then had managed to conceal by the noisy nonsense of his hot-blooded utterances.

Horace mopped his brow, and tried to be calmer. Well, the wild-tongued tyrant and rabble-rouser was out of office now! But he had left an arsenal of dissension which might explode into anything short of civil war. He had cast suspicion on the Senate; he had set the people against the banks . . . and the banks against each other, with all that talk of Pet Banks and private banks. . . . He had inadvertently encouraged an orgy of speculation, Horace told himself, because he never had grasped the fact that *dealing* in land bears little relation to *developing* land. And then, when he saw the wildfire of trading, he had issued his dangerous Specie Circular, and that had started cartloads of silver and gold rumbling back and forth across the country, keeping it in senseless circulation like the weights on a pulley, while Eastern business choked itself to death with paper banknotes. . . .

Well, Horace thought dismally, the seeds of disaster which Jackson had lavishly scattered, were beginning to sprout now, and God knows what would happen from here on. . . .

The cadaverous preacher was shouting as a counterpoint to

Horace's bitterness, and his voice rasped down Horace's nerves like a dentist's file on an open tooth.

"God Almighty has picked up this building and has squeezed it into dust in the palm of His hand."

The crowd surged, and smacked its lips with approval. Horace, disgusted almost to vomiting, listened in spite of himself. Police ought to handle cranks like this; you couldn't anticipate what trouble they could stir up, with their crazy inflamed nonsense. Freedom of speech, they probably called it; freedom of poppycock.

"The wrath of God will shake the foundation of every bank in this country. The day of judgment has come for you swindlers and robbers of the poor and fatherless. Your sins have found you out!"

The poor and fatherless, some redolent with looted spirits from the near-by taverns, leered at each other triumphantly. They hoped everything *was* going to be leveled down to where their filthy hands could grab it.

"Amen. Praise the Lord!" they shouted. Next to Horace, a vile-smelling old ragbag grabbed a frowsy woman and kissed her roundly.

They knew nothing at all about the real situation; but ignorance had never prevented them from explaining things to each other.

"President Jackson tried to stop them bankers," they said to each other. "*He* understood them swells! He warned everybody about old Nick Biddle and his dirty old money."

"That's right, brother. I wouldn't put none of my money in no bank," one ragged old man said to another. "You know where I keep my money?" His thick excited lips drew near to his neighbor's ear, and he muttered and wagged his head, and then they both guffawed obscenely.

Another little man said to anybody around who cared to listen, "I keep my money in silver. None of this worthless paper for me any more. I hear that out West . . . back of the Allegheny Mountains, they ain't got anything but cut money. There ain't any American money out there, they tell me."

"We gotta have a new day of reckonin' in this country," a woman said. "You mind what I say."

To the ignorant it was more than an accidental collapse of a building which had been too hastily constructed of unsound materials; it was an ominous warning from Heaven of a col-

lapse of the invisible structure on which their very lives were built.

Horace, loathing the fear and ignorance, bowed down and cringed before the very fear. He knew the contagion of terror, and what it could do if it ever swept through depositors and merchants and manufacturers. Even in his own brain, that excellently organized little mechanism of facts and reasoning, he could smell the smoke of a bonfire of fear. It was more than smoke in his brain now; it was a secret blaze . . . and it could not be kept secret long. . . .

But however ill and frightened he felt as he went to bed that night, he felt worse on Friday afternoon. For by then he guessed the full extent of the spreading whirlpool of ruin. It was not just an unfortunate coincidence which had brought his father's estate and his own affairs to a tremble of momentary embarrassment. It was much, much more than that.

He had the first inkling of it, actually, when he went into the offices of the Josephs Brothers' Bank. The place was swarming with white-faced men. In each eye the same glittering abstracted fear gleamed like a nail-head, plainly visible above the expedient courtesy and calm of well-controlled smiles.

Even to Horace, whose blind reverence for business usually kept him from seeing any comedy in finance, there was grim humor in the greeting of his old friend, Jacob Marcossen, one of the officials of the bank.

As they shook hands, Jacob said, "We appreciate your coming, Horace." Marcossen's eyes were misted with emotion. "I know it's what your father would have wanted you to do. The old man would be glad to know that his money was being offered. . . ."

Horace, his mind nimble in spite of the weight of his gloom, spared himself the embarrassment of explaining that he had not come to help but to be helped. He waved his big hand vaguely, feeling as if he were talking to a man deliriously ill, and hence incapable of reason.

"We really haven't a thing to worry about," said Marcossen, his eyes denying his words. "Already several of the banks have offered Mr. Josephs their support. Totaling up to a million and a half, I may tell you confidentially."

"Everyone will help," Horace said staunchly, concealing the fact that this was the first intimation he had had that the

Josephs were in a precarious position, quite apart from the building tragedy. "This country is much bigger than any little group of merchants or speculators, or even bankers."

"Oh, yes," Marcossen said too heartily. "The country is fundamentally sound. You see, our difficulty comes from Europe. Several important London banks . . ."

"We'll get the whole thing stabilized," Horace said loudly, "once the bankers stop trying to knife each other. Van Buren's going to be a better President for us."

The whole atmosphere of the place was fatally, desperately cheerful, and the more heartily men listened to themselves talking, knowing the hollowness within, the more abysmal and terrible their fear became. But by late afternoon, everybody gave up trying to cheer everybody else.

A packet had come in from the South, bringing news so incredibly bad that everything else was dwarfed and forgotten. Cotton had collapsed; the corner was broken, and the richest cotton houses in the South had gone completely under. The whole city of New Orleans was in the midst of financial paralysis. One out of every five of the bank directors themselves, fabulously wealthy men, was suddenly found to be personally insolvent, just as Tobias Phelps had been. Some said the indebtedness in liabilities in cotton factors and land speculation would run as high as two hundred million dollars. What this was going to do to Wall Street, and then to the banks, could only be gloomily guessed.

By night every banker and broker had run to cover, and the realistic ones were already beginning to stop payments.

Before Horace crossed on the ferry to take the steam car back to Philadelphia on Saturday, he and Jacob Marcossen faced each other frankly.

"You hold on any way you can manage," Jacob advised. "As for us, we'll sink, as sure as you're a minute old. We're too big to squeeze past."

"But you said the other banks had offered to tide you over. . . ." Horace reminded him.

"They've offered a million and a half," Marcossen said shaking his head. "But it would take another million, maybe more, to keep us open."

"What'll we do?" Horace asked sickly.

"Some of us will go to hell, and some will go to jail. A few will wriggle out early, before the public realizes what is hap-

pening to the country. That's what I hope you can do, Horace."

Then Horace made an epigram . . . probably the first one in his life. But he was too frantic even to notice that it was an epigram . . . one of those things his brother Stephen was so good at.

"It's too late for any of us to do anything early," he said.

(2)

After his brief breakdown the night of the Meschianza when he gazed for an instant over the precipice of his own terror, Stephen quickly drew back and returned to the more bearable assumption that, for Amoret and himself at least, the fantastic dissolving of the estate probably was only a misprint on the page.

He drove in his phaeton behind his team of well-clipped grays down to Third Street near Walnut where Benjamin Van Dyke had his law office. He sat patiently half the afternoon while Van Dyke tried to explain to him exactly why Tobias Phelps' fortune was gone. All that Stephen grasped clearly was the extent of his father's integrity. That fine old man . . . his son had lost more than an indulgent father; he had lost an ideal and a hero.

The old giant had discovered that some of the directors in his companies had blown up speculation to a point where trusting, small persons were doomed inevitably to lose their savings. Without hesitation, Tobias had liquidated his entire personal holdings to try and prevent those losses.

"The tragedy is that he couldn't prevent them," Van Dyke said. "He threw in everything he had, but there wasn't enough. The Mississippi and Alabama Railroad and Banking Company, for instance, was established on a capital of \$155,000. Yet it issued \$424,500 in bills, of which about \$71,000 were made payable at your father's bank.

"Then your father discovered that not a dollar had been placed in the bank by that company to cover the redemption of those bills so he, himself, made that good," Benjamin said quietly. He looked over at Stephen, then he went on.

"He mortgaged your country seat, which was still in his name, in order to do it."

"You mean my very house . . . you mean my house and my acres . . . ?" Stephen couldn't even say the words to complete the preposterous sentence. Then he whispered them, "You mean they are *gone*?"

"I'm afraid I do, son."

Stephen stared at him dully, while the lawyer said,

"But he believed that he would be alive long enough to adjust everything. He thought you would never even need to know. . . ."

"He should have told me," Stephen said, with a hot flush across his face. "I'm not exactly a child. I had proved to him I could build one of the greatest show places in the country. . . ."

Even as he said it, he had, for the first time in his life, a sense that perhaps the talent for spending money lavishly and well is a somewhat effete ability, which becomes tragically incongruous when the less graceful talent for earning money is withdrawn.

"Your father never admitted defeat. Even up to the very end, he believed he would be able to save the estate," Van Dyke said.

"But that will . . . that strange will he left?"

"He did not know how ironical that will would be," Benjamin said. "He wanted to leave you everything he had . . . but it was only a day before his last heart attack that he realized it would be only those two bequests. . . ."

"The two?" Stephen asked, his hope leaping up with almost painful relief. Why, of course; he knew there would be *something*. . . .

"The book . . . and the papers . . . you reemember?"

"Oh, yes," Stephen muttered. "The book." He must remember to look at that book; he knew Amoret had it in their sitting room. And the papers . . . what would they be? Why . . . they might be some old holdings . . . perhaps some old stock which Tobias had not thrown into the liquidation! He would investigate those immediately.

Perhaps, with these papers of his father's and that secret investment he himself had made a few months ago, he could pull their affairs out of the swamp! That would be a good jest . . . Stephen Phelps, whom his brother . . . and even his own father, if the truth were told . . . had thought of as an impractical dandy.

He tried to think dispassionately, as if this were all happening to someone else. Conversationally, he knew quite a lot about business. He could hold his own with anybody else in discussing finance. He wasn't especially interested in it, but he felt that it was the duty of a gentleman to be well-informed. He had often talked about business matters with his father. But he generally came out of these pleasant conversations with more of a sense of the drama with which Tobias invested every event of his life, than with any sober estimation of financial routine. It had been one of the well-meaning wrongs which Tobias had done his favorite younger son, that he had always made his own difficulties and achievements sound swashbuckling and gay and carefree. Because he had lived a life of hardship and challenge himself, he had gritted his teeth with determination that such things never could come near his son. It was Tobias' dearest reward to himself . . . the only one he had asked . . . that he should be able to provide a world which would be like a gentlemen's club to this son who had been born when Tobias was fifty-one.

He intended that to this son the world would always seem a well-furnished beautiful room, with books ranging to the ceiling, with a fire on the hearth, and fine wines on the buffet. It would always be lived in by other amiable pleasant men who knew no fear nor uncertainty. To care for these men's slightest wishes, there would be well-trained, good-natured servants. The servants would be people who enjoyed serving, because they loved and admired these good and pleasant men. This was the dream Tobias had dreamed for his son . . . and he had nearly brought it to actuality.

Stephen had a sense of responsibility toward people less fortunate than he. He sympathized with them and hoped to see their lot made easier, as of course it would be as time went on. That was what civilized men worked for; to improve the lot of their fellows.

But now he felt suddenly confounded and terrified. If a man's entire background were wiped away . . . his foreground, which was benevolence and altruism and philanthropy, would disappear.

Benjamin, that sour-faced old skeptic, was trying to re-interpret the world for Stephen. The minute his father had turned his back, so to speak, people were trying to undo what

he had spent his life establishing. Optimism sprang from Stephen's experience rather than from his nature. He was an optimist not born, but made. And the making had not been by his own deeds, but by those of his father. Things always *had* happened favorably for him; that was the pattern of his experience, and he knew it always would be. His quick easy faith was like a shining trapeze, always at the right instant appearing under his very hand, ready to swing him safely across any momentary danger. He seized that trapeze now, and swung out bravely across the gloomy realism of his father's old fussbudget of a lawyer.

He *would* not be stampeded about all this; he would not be knocked off his mental balance. He would take the whole thing as it came, and when the story was complete he was confident that things would not be as bad as everyone was trying to tell him they were.

When he came to see his father's lawyer this morning, he had intended to tell him about that investment of his own of which he was secretly so proud. But he left without telling Van Dyke. His classmate, Stanton Purvis, had given him the chance to buy into the big opportunity. Stant's father had put a large part of his own fortune in, and Stant even now had gone out to help with the building.

He thought about this as he was driving home from that dreary hammering Benjamin had given him. By the time he had reached his house, he felt somewhat restored by his determination to make something of his own investment.

Mrs. Durkee met him at the door, but even she looked worried instead of welcoming as she was accustomed to looking.

"Mr. Stephen, I wish you would come downstairs to my sitting room and let me talk to you a minute," she said in a nervous little flutter.

"Can't it wait?" Stephen said.

"But I thought if you were just . . . well, if you'd just be frank with me . . . it might save everybody being upset," Mrs. Durkee said, torturing the front of her white apron with her rather elegant little housekeeper hands. "People keep saying things . . . and the servants are beginning to question me." She rallied angrily then. "It's strange how gossip gets about. I keep saying I know there's nothing to it!"

"So do I," Stephen said. Then suddenly he wasn't the im-

portant, enviable master of the house; he was the little boy that had been put into Mrs. Durkee's care when his own mother had died. "So do I. But sometimes I wonder myself, Durk." He hadn't called her Durk since he came home from college.

"You mean?"

"I really don't know *what* I mean," he said. "Something *has* happened. Just how far it is going to go . . . just what it is going to do to us. . . ." He broke off, and Mrs. Durkee immediately began bustling with reassurance. Their roles in an instant were reversed, just as they had been years ago when she had intended to scold him about something, and then had seen behind his bravado a frightened, somewhat lonely little boy. It had always ended by Stephen blaming himself and apologizing, and Durk gruffly trying to prove to him that he had done *perfectly* right! And who said he hadn't?

"Why, what nonsense!" she said now. "Suppose we do have to close up this house for a little while until things get straightened out! Suppose we have to let the servants go, and get a whole new set of them in!" The housekeeper's apron and the years disappeared; whole paragraphs of understanding which they didn't need to utter, flowed between them. Her tight little brown eyes glittered with protectiveness and anger. The idea of anybody worrying Mr. Stephen!

"Let's close up this house for a while," she said blusteringly as if this were a wholly delightful idea. "How would it be if we went in and stayed at your father's house a while? Be rather nice to be in town again. I think Mrs. Phelps would like it, too. You could go to the theaters more easily. . . ."

The moment that was out, they both knew the whole thing was bluff, because they were in mourning and there wouldn't be any theaters for them. But they did not mention that; Stephen nodded his head and appeared to be considering it.

"A good idea," he said. "I think Mrs. Phelps *would* like it."

"I'll give them their notice," Mrs. Durkee said crisply. "I could give it to them for the first of April. . . ."

Stephen went on slowly up the stairs, and he whistled a little, under his breath, but he knew that it wasn't fooling Durk. It wasn't fooling him either.

As he came near their own rooms he could hear Amoret inside, playing her delicate harp music. He stood outside the door and listened, his ears caressing each note as it floated al-

most like a soap bubble. He loved the music not alone with his ears or his mind, but with all of him, because it was coming from those little pearly fingers which somehow had got a grip around his heart. The music pattered down all around him in a miniature, fragrant rainfall. Unconsciously he held up the palm of his hand as if he could feel the very raindrops on his skin. A room with a harp in it was like a heart with a woman in it . . . with love to play upon the woman as a hand plays across a harp. All the love he had for this girl whom he had married welled up in him and made him feel suddenly strong and male, and at the same time weak and drained.

It could not happen that they would be torn out of the beautiful setting of their life together! It would be inartistic and ugly and inappropriate and *impossible* that the beautiful child to whom he was married would have to be snatched out of this lovely garment of existence and dressed in some mocking, ill-fitting masquerade. Their lives were set on a stage for high comedy, with silk and harp-music and firelight . . . and leisure to enjoy them all. That was the fact; anything else was impudent distortion.

He knew how the room would look before he knocked with his knuckles and waited to open the door. The music stopped at his knock, and Amoret's voice, only less limpid than the last golden, round note of her harp said, "Come in." Her voice had a pleased up-tilt as she spoke his name, "Stephen."

He did not go in immediately. Instead he opened the door and stood looking into the room as if he must memorize its sight forever. The golden harp was less golden than her hair. The lines of it, the flowing melodic lines, were less musical than her beautiful little body. The harp was a woman-thing . . . the two of them, exquisite little women-things . . . making their music, which you heard not only with your ears, but with everything you were. All the beauty and the preciousness of his life, threatened now by some anarchy, seemed mirrored in this moment . . . the room to live in, and the pulses of his body throbbing with love of all the room implied.

The room was full of the gold of her. It shone on everything with a kind of tender light. The hollow between her breasts seemed to glow as if from within. The curve of her shoulder above her green housegown was painted in with two

brush strokes, one a gilded pink, the other modeling with violet. Her lips, almost too rich for beauty, smiled at him. Her lips had always seemed to him a promise which the rest of her had not yet quite fulfilled.

He went over to the harp and bent to kiss her. But she turned her face, and slipped quickly from the embrace of the harp into the embrace of the man. In a swift moment of intuition he knew that Amoret had an almost passionate sense of fidelity; when she sat at the harp, she gave herself completely to the music; when she clung in her husband's arms, she was his, and the music and the world itself lay unnoticed behind her.

"I know now why you won't kiss me at your harp," he said ardently. "I just found out. I saw it in your face, my darling." She was disconcerted for a moment, until she knew that what he saw had pleased him.

"You are a woman who has a genius for love," he said. "I want love to be everything in your life, and all of it for me."

After a few minutes, she looked up eagerly into his face, trying to read what the afternoon had scribbled there. She wasn't sure whether or not she ought to ask him about it.

He dropped down on a little satin settee, just behind where they had been standing, and reached out and gently drew her to him, so that she stood between his knees as if *she* were a harp. He held one hand with his, and with the other he caressed her shoulder. The fancy savagely delighted him in his most erotic depths, while the surface of his mind felt ashamed, yet helpless to evade the pantomime. Involuntarily he was caught in his own symbolism; he felt as if he must sweep a new music from this woman.

Then, as he had seen behind the veil of Amoret's face into her fancy of a moment before, now she read this tableau of theirs. She would not have presumed to tell him what she saw, even if she could have found words to tell it. Yet she wanted him to know she had seen, and that she was not displeased.

"Will this music do?" she said softly, and bent and kissed him, swiftly and ardently.

Even beyond the unexpected kiss, the intimacy of minds completely unusual between them, thrilled him as no intimacy of passion ever had. But although he was a lover bold in deeds, he had almost a boy's shyness about speech that

tries to clothe the deed. After a moment, he got up from the settee and she knew that he was quickly changing his mood to say something which must be said.

"I want to talk to you, Amoret," he said. "Let's talk sensibly."

"Of course," she said.

"Would you care if we left this house . . . for a little while, I mean?"

"Left this house? You mean take a trip somewhere, dear? But I thought you were going to have to stay right here and straighten out all that business about your father. . . ."

"I am," he said, and then he seized on the convenient reasonableness of this. "That's why I think maybe it would be a good idea if we gave up this house for awhile . . . I need to be in the city, a little closer to affairs. Banks and lawyers and things."

She looked into his eyes, then she put her hands around his face, and suddenly, as Mrs. Durkee had been a few minutes ago, Amoret became an older woman protecting a little boy.

"Stephen," she said, "it doesn't matter what happens to us. It really doesn't matter, does it?" She yearned to say something better than that, but she didn't know how. She wanted to say surely a woman and a man with a firmament of love between them, ought to be able to create some universe of their own, which nothing . . . no old man's will, no old lawyer's logic . . . could touch. But she could not say it.

"I don't care where we go, Stephen," she said. "I only want to be wherever you are."

He said, "Of course you do, darling," and dismissed it as only an easy wifely little nothing, superficial as a morning's good-bye kiss. She took her hands away from his face then, and went across the room as if she knew that whenever she was too close to him it never would be with her mind that she was close.

She opened a gold box on top of her desk, removed a small ornamental key and unlocked a drawer. It amused him to watch her. All her little playthings, all her little golden keys, her innocent locked-away secrets! What was she going to show him? Some little bracelet, probably, given her when she was a child. She would offer it and imagine in her darling little head that it would give them some leeway.

"You haven't looked at it yet, Stephen," she said. "You haven't even asked about it."

"Asked about what? Looked at what, Pet?"

"The inheritance your father left you."

She came back across the room holding a folded sheet of paper, one of Tobias' big cream letterheads. She opened it so that he could see the march of the bold tall writing across it, and handed it to him without a word.

His hand trembled a little as he took it, because unexpectedly he was moved with grief at the sight of that familiar writing. There was something so personal and real in the vigorous gaunt handwriting that he could not believe for a moment that his father was gone, and only his writing remained.

To his great surprise the letter was not written to him, but to them both.

My dear children, Amoret and Stephen:

The diary is to show you how we came out of the past. The book will show you how to go into the future. With all my love . . .

The letter had been started high up at the top of the page, as if Tobias had had much he intended to say.

But it broke off abruptly, the very word unfinished. In your own body you felt that wrench of physical agony which had ended the letter and the life. The interrupted letter hurt him unbearably, so that he must think of something else. As quickly as he could, he went over to the desk and picked up the packet of papers.

So it was a journal. He opened it and read here and there, and his face felt hot with shame because in spite of the way he loved his father, he loathed the earnestness and the naïveté which had caused him to write as he had. And over all that, he loathed himself for feeling as he did about it. He snapped the diary closed, and kept his face turned from Amoret so she might not read what he could not help feeling, of anger and despair and resentment.

"Where's the book . . . that book he seemed to feel was important enough to put in a will?" he asked impatiently.

"It's there. Right under your hand." She didn't attempt to come near, as if she understood the clash of loyalty and disillusion that was tearing him apart, and knew she must not add to it.

"What is the book?" he asked.

"It's the Bible."

He swung then and looked at her, his face surprised into a quick incredulous grin.

"You're joking . . . ! You shouldn't joke about a thing like that."

"It's the Bible," Amoret said. "He left it for your inheritance, Stephen."

He picked it up and looked at it, and then dropped it back on the desk.

"My God!" he cried angrily. "I thought it would at least be something I could use . . . some book on finance . . . something practical to help me . . . but what can we do with a Bible?"

Of all the beastly things that had happened to him in the past ten days, this was the most stinging and mocking! Could his father have been dotty, as Horace said? He felt dizzy nausea grinding in him; his very brain wanted to vomit up the ugliness and impudence on which it had been forced to feed; in all his life he never had known such humiliation . . . a double shame for his father and for himself.

Well, he *would* have to rely upon himself from now on. He would salvage what he could, and build for himself.

(3)

April was a month out of madness, which people tried throughout their whole lives afterwards to forget. The incredible became the usual; the unbelievable next day exceeded its own preposterousness.

By May the smallest man in the country knew what had happened, because the blight had withered his own pocket. The humblest huckster, the least pretentious merchant, the smallest tradesman and craftsman lived through the same swift melodrama of upheaval as the big men in the country. It was like a stencil, designed in big patterns and tiny ones, to fit any circumstance. Everybody tried frantically to collect what was owed him, so that he could pay off his own clamoring debts. The brick dustman lifted the knocker on the front door and begged for the thirty cents due him for the last three weeks' deliveries; the New Bedford Steamship Company and the Mobile Cotton Brokerage, Incorporated,

sent agents converging like vultures to foreclose on the same mansions. Everybody was at the same time a creditor and a debtor, the little men and the important ones alike. But all power to act in either capacity, seemed suddenly cut off. Whether you owe or have owing to you makes very little difference, when there is no money for either function.

Such currency as there was scampered to hiding, burrowed underground, tied itself up in the toes of old stockings, hid away in bedchambers. You could buy desperately offered merchandise for just nothing; but it happened at that moment that you didn't even have the nothing!

Creditors tried to collect early, before other creditors arrived; settlements which normally would have required weeks for consummation, were clamped overnight upon personal property, bank accounts, jewels, carriages . . . anything that trembling hands could lay hold upon. Injunctions and attachments blew through the days like autumn leaves in a gale. Manufacturers, lately swollen into giants by the mad hope of dressing everybody in the world in an extensive cotton wardrobe, were stifled with overstocks exceeded in size only by the bills owing for raw materials which couldn't be paid off. Fast as cotton prices had risen during the boom, they plunged down even faster. Cotton which had sold for fifteen to twenty cents a pound, now couldn't even be sold at eight to twelve.

England, its hand also in a flat pocket, bellowed for settlement. But even the intrepid Nicholas Biddle's remittance of two millions to London, couldn't keep the drowning American credit afloat. Men who had hung five or even six zeros on a digit to measure their assets, suddenly found themselves bankrupt because they couldn't get their hands on a miserable fifteen thousand dollars.

Every bank in the city and in New York was surrounded by milling crowds of poor people, clutching banknotes which could not be converted into silver. For the silver simply didn't exist. Horace estimated that silver in the country had shrunk to only six silver dollars per person.

The little rabbit-men like Trumbull Stacey, who always had lived in a mental atmosphere of uncertainty and servility, took the thing better than other men. Even before one of old Tobias' creditors could descend upon the Stacey house (in this case possession was being claimed by a tobacco broker-

age company gasping out its last breath before it, too, was seized by other creditors), Trumbull had everything organized for his family's departure. He went immediately north to the "wrong end of the city," and there on a shabby little street running off Seventh, he found a dwelling place humble and safely small, from which he felt quite sure nobody would evict them again.

Eliza's way of dealing with the crisis was to take immediately to her bed on the assumption that nobody, no matter how ruthless a dripping-jowled money-lover he might be, could move a poor sick woman out of her home. She lay and sniveled for days on end, a mountainous ruin of helplessness and indulgence. Under her whimpering her mind tatted away on an endless chain of angry, impractical plans, embellished with blaming and revenge. Outside her door she heard the moving men tramping up and down, carrying out her treasures, the very furniture and carpets, and finally her own clothes, those enormous tents of satin and lace, encrusted with bows and beading and bulges. Hour by hour they tightened the circle around her bed, but she held fast. She had a handful of jewelry hidden under her pillow, and she clutched it for comfort when she was most in despair, and made fatuous plans for paying it to somebody who would guarantee her care and food for the rest of her life.

Marianne, Bess, and Faith, like three sad-faced black bats, came out only at night when the house was quiet behind the pulled-down blinds and the latched shutters. They fluttered around trying futilely to pack up what could conceivably be called their own private possessions. Marianne had a garnet cross given her last Christmas by the elusive Prentiss boy, whom the Staceys hoped might be thinking about marrying her. Bess thought that when things got a little better, she might sell her water colors. . . .

For the first time in his life Trumbull was making himself heard. It was almost a relief for Trumbull to be in his native habitat at last, for he was a man made for retrenchment. His small, narrow, meticulous mind took delight in the pinching in, as it had been shocked into blinking alarm by expansion. Opulence had always had the signature of someone else upon it, but penury he recognized as a check drawn against his own account.

"We'll manage, girls," he said, over and over, to his three

daughters. "You wait and see. We'll come out of this all right, and I wouldn't be surprised if we might even be a happier family than we used to be." This they took as their father's brave nonsense.

Being in his own small way a quite practical man, Trumbull looked over his abilities to see what he had which he could hire out to make a living for them all. He even made a list of what he considered his personal assets. He wrote them down fairly; there were no startling talents. He knew he had a good disposition and he knew he was honest. He wrote down those two qualities first, but he could not conceive of any market for either, so he thought again. He had the ability to do cheerfully whatever other men told him to, and that, he had found, was a salable asset. But this, also, was without market at this moment, when nobody was finding it very profitable to issue any kind of orders. He was sitting in a nearly empty room, writing at a spindley-legged little escritoire nobody yet had claimed. Suddenly it struck him that the best thing he had to sell was his bold and legible handwriting.

"Why, of course," he said delightedly to himself. "A very useful commodity at this time."

He got out his glossy beaver stovepipe and brushed it carefully and went immediately down to Dickson's Writing Institute, at 178 North Third Street. He felt quite cheerful as he went up the stairs. There must be lots of writing to be done these days, foreclosures, notices of bankruptcy, dunning letters.

He got that job that very afternoon; he was to write in the morning, and in the afternoon he was to teach other men to master a "mercantile style of writing executed with ease, freedom, and rapidity" as the Dickson's Institute advertised it could do.

He was the first of the whole tribe of the Phelps to adjust himself in a practical way to the new conditions under which they all were going to have to live. It was the first time in his life that Trumbull had ever been first about anything.

(4)

When they were halfway between the two houses, his own and his father's, Stephen found both doors bolted, so to

speaking, against them. It was too desperate a situation now to be talked off. The whole thing had to be dealt with drastically and immediately. Grimly he and Mrs. Durkee packed the choicest of the furniture, the wedding presents, which could hardly be claimed by Tobias' creditors, Amoret's harp, her exquisite clothes and the simple jewelry she had brought from her girlhood (Van Dyke said the court would have to decide what disposition must be made of the jewelry Stephen had given her). They crowded these treasures in a mad but orderly assemblage into one room, Mrs. Durkee made a neat inventory, and then they locked the door. The wide kind world had shrunk now to the size of this room. And even this room was safe only so long as the door was locked and Mrs. Durkee had the key hanging on a chain at her waist.

Stephen and Amoret "borrowed" their own phaeton and drove to the United States Hotel.

"We'll stay here," Stephen said, "until we decide what to do. We'll make a very jolly kind of picnic out of it, shall we?" They carried with them only their hand luggage. Their trunks and some of Stephen's collection of paintings, their own beautiful bedlinens and a few ornaments and knick-knacks to make their suite more habitable, would come later when Mrs. Durkee had time to pack them.

Stephen was pale but cheerful throughout all this, and Amoret kept thinking how wonderful it was to be married to a man who knew how to manage things, even affairs which were contracting as rapidly as all their circumstances seemed to be. There was no effort on her part to be brave; she saw no reason to fear anything as long as Stephen was with her.

He carried an important-looking portfolio in the phaeton, and a roll of paper which was too big to fit in the folio. It gave him a jaunty, debonair look as if he were a young artist with a masterpiece rolled up under his arm. He refused to let it out of his own hand; he wouldn't even allow one of the hotel attendants to carry it upstairs.

"What is that?" Amoret asked gaily. "You're being very mysterious about it, darling."

"I'm keeping it for a surprise," he said.

The heavy impersonal elegance of their suite depressed Stephen, who had made such an art of fitting a room to its master. He looked out the window onto Chestnut Street. It was late afternoon, and the shadows looked chill and bleak.

Directly opposite the hotel was the big white marble structure of Nicholas Biddle's United States Bank. It looked like the ghostly tomb it was; a mausoleum of dead hopes and dreams. Stephen turned away quickly. It seemed as if one couldn't get away from the symbols and signs of this blight which had struck everything. But *he* was going to get away from it; make no mistake about that, he said to himself valiantly.

A dirty-faced man servant was trotting about noisily, putting a taper to all the lamps in the room. A middle-aged woman was kneeling at the hearth lighting a fire in the little marble grate; they were doing everything they could to make the ugly, vulgar room seem cheerful.

"I've ordered our dinner to be served up here," Stephen said. "We're having everything you like, darling. Oysters, pheasant under glass, mushrooms, charlotte russe . . . anything you wish, to make a party."

The servants had withdrawn from the room now, and Stephen walked about restlessly. They must keep themselves occupied, so they wouldn't depress each other. Self-pity always seemed to him to be part of the conventional furniture in a hotel room. . . . Well, they'd have none of it.

"Now is the time for me to tell you about my good news," he said eagerly.

He untied a blue tape from around the big roll of thick paper, and spread out on the center table a colored, hand-drawn map four feet long and a yard wide—more of a drawing than a map. It showed a beautiful city, and it looked as if it had been painted by an angel suspended in the air above it. That angel with the diamond pen, she had read about in Tobias' big book last night?

Amoret looked down on it with utter delight, as if it were a toy town and she an enchanted child bending above it. It was the cleanest, most beautiful city she ever had seen. Its streets, like the streets of Philadelphia itself, were laid out in straight rows, right-angled and tidy. There were trees and gardens and parks . . . much more intimate than the Fairmount Gardens which everyone thought were so wonderful, set above Philadelphia. These little parks and gardens were dotted through the very midst of the city . . . almost like the clusters of moss roses on her peach-colored damask curtains at home. She saw at a glance that these gardens belonged to

everybody, the rich and the poor, the way things should belong, if this really were a country where everyone could be free and equal, as Tobias always said.

There were adorable small buildings drawn along the streets of the map. Stores and banks and theaters and school-houses. Whoever had drawn the map had loved the whole idea so much that he had even drawn attractive little barouches, and gigs with tiny horses prancing; and going up the steps of the school were two wee children with a nurse. On the streets well-protected from the noisier business part of the town, were rows of residences, some elaborate and rich-looking as Horace's house, some small and quaint and charming, with toy gardens around them.

"Why, Stephen . . . how beautiful! Where is this wonderful place? It looks like a map of heaven."

"It is, in a way," he said, delighted with her pleasure. "It is a map of your new home, Mrs. Stephen Phelps."

"But where . . . where on earth?"

"You know I told you," he said, trying not to sound too triumphant about conveying some good news which, at last, had a foundation in fact. "You know I told you some time ago, dear, that I had made an important investment with my own personal funds? I didn't want anybody to discuss it. . . . I was sorry that I couldn't let Horace into it. . . . You see, my friend Stanton Purvis from college invited me to come in on it."

"What does it mean?" Amoret cried. "You must tell me . . . never mind the business part of it . . . tell me exactly about it. . . ."

He opened the portfolio then, and took out handsomely printed brochures, and some detail-maps, showing more exact measurements of particular properties, and then some very official deeds and contracts, with red and blue and gold seals affixed to them. There were signatures and dates, and all the wonderfully reassuring paraphernalia which signified that this was actually true and entirely business-like.

"These are city bonds," he explained importantly. "Stant says they will be worth five times what I paid for them in a couple of years, when our city is finished."

"Oh, darling, I knew we couldn't be poor," Amoret cried and squeezed him with all her strength. "I knew you'd think of something! You always do. You're so clever."

Stephen began reading her the brochure put out by the company which had floated these bonds. It all had the most wonderful promise about it, worded so beautifully: "A dream-city . . . no poverty, no slums. The labor of the city will be done by blacks and by immigrants from Europe. These will live in a section set aside for them under the most sanitary of conditions.

"This is a city devoted to culture, education, and to good and luxurious living, the best yet achieved in America. A modern Athens . . . Mount Olympus, Illinois."

"Such wonderful words," Amoret said, clapping her hands admiringly. "What *do* they mean?"

"They mean that your husband is taking care of you," he said. "I have bought property . . . sites for our city house and our country seat, also business property in the middle of the city. Later I shall sell the business property at an appropriate profit. Do you realize, my dear, that at this very moment certain farm land on Long Island is selling at \$1000 an acre?" His eyes mused dreamily on this a few moments, while Amoret made suitable wifely little cluckings. "Stanton told me about a hundred and fifteen acres in Louisville which cost \$675 fifteen years ago. Last year it was sold for \$275,000." He turned back to the map.

"Right here . . . let me show you . . . I shall build our city home. And then, about as far from the metropolis as Wide Acres, right *here*, we shall build another country seat. We shall make it as perfect as Wide Acres . . . and more perfect. This will be ours, and we'll live in it throughout our lifetime."

She leaned against him in happy limpness and relief. You could see he had everything all worked out!

"We shall go out as soon as we can make our traveling arrangements and settle up our affairs here. Later we will send for our own servants, Mrs. Durkee and Millie and the rest that we select."

"But, Stephen, you should have told me about it before!" she said.

"I wanted to wait until I was positive how the plans were working out. You see, Stant arranged for my property some months ago. Immediately afterwards he went out with his father. They are in St. Louis right now. I had a letter yesterday."

"And he said?"

"He said not to worry about any talk I might hear . . . you see, he knows that our banks here in Philadelphia are in a terrible fix . . . by now he's probably heard that they all stopped payment two days ago . . . But all of that is no concern of ours. We are looking in another direction now, Amoret. . . . Just the way our ancestors did when they pushed to the West."

"Oh, Stephen . . . I wish your father knew! It is exactly what he would have wanted for us . . . he would be so proud of you, darling. You never told him?"

His face clouded a moment. "I wanted to surprise him, when everything was finished. I wanted to show him. . . ." His voice broke off; he refused to slip back into the sorrow and confusion which swept over him when he thought of his father, and all that bruised past, so recent, yet so far-away.

He turned bodily from that past back to the table, where the magnificent animated map of the future lay.

"Yes, I had a letter from Stant. He said the best people in New York and Boston are investing in Mount Olympus, Illinois. We shall be building something wonderful together."

He rolled up the map and then bowed low, and handed it to her as if he were presenting her with the scroll of the firmament.

"Your new world, Madame," he said, with more emotion than he had intended in his make-believe ceremony. "I give it to you." He kissed her hand. "Mount Olympus, Illinois."

(5)

Suddenly the whole tempo of the Phelps's affairs was stepped up to a frantic climax.

As Stephen had so casually told Amoret, all the banks of Philadelphia had suspended payment on May eleventh. The newspaper said, "Chaos, bewilderment, despondency, and lamentation are the order of the day."

Three hundred firms failed in New York City. Less than a week before, John Fleming, President of the Merchants' Bank, had fallen dead from what his physicians pronounced as "excessive anxiety regarding the affairs of his bank." Merchants failed by whole blocks; United States Bank stock for

the first time in twenty years fell below par; not a stock on the market brought par.

The night of the eleventh, Horace Phelps didn't even come home. He sat in his office, twisting figures about in his mind, and trying to make a corkscrew out of them which would open up some tiny hole of escape. Harriet, purposeful and calm, ordered the landau and drove downtown. There, before her husband's locked bank, she disembarked and elbowed her way fearlessly through the muttering crowds on the sidewalk. She had a big capable pail of soup in one hand and a little wicker basket in the other full of hot rolls, which that very afternoon she had made with her own hands, in her own kitchen. She rapped noisily on the big bronze-studded door of the bank. Angry depositors had been rapping all morning, but this knock had something especially authoritative about it, and the door was unbolted and opened. She wedged herself inside, and there she took charge for the next hour or so.

"You eat this, Mr. Phelps. Here, whoever *you* are over there on that stool . . . you'd better have some soup, too. You look about to die."

"Go away, Mrs. Phelps," Horace said petulantly, but she paid not the slightest attention.

"The house is in my name, and nobody can touch it," she said. "So we'll always have a roof over our heads. And we'll always have food in our stomachs as long as I'm alive." She was cheerful and busy, ladling out the soup in any receptacle she could find, good rich beef soup with onions and potatoes. None of that thin drizzle that was supposed to be fashionable . . . consommé or whatever they called it. She liked soup you could chew!

"I'll put out a sign. But I don't think that will be necessary. We can take in plenty of boarders from right among our own prosperous friends," she said without humor. "I'll charge 'em reasonable, and feed 'em good, the way my mother did. And don't you worry."

She was behind Horace now, and she tied a yard-square napkin around his neck, with rabbit-ears sticking out of the knot jauntily. She bent and kissed his head, and the kiss was as gentle as the words were gruff.

Amoret and Stephen, still living with alternate diffidence and bravado in their suite in the United States Hotel, kept to themselves as much as possible. They found it was much eas-

ier to be brave and happy and courageous if they were alone. When Stephen did go down to his club, he always was depressed by the talk there.

"The city's like a morgue," he complained to himself.

These men seemed to think the whole country was doomed, just because they'd got themselves into some tangle.

"Why, it's the end of America, I tell you," a thin tragic man was shouting, while Stephen was trying to eat a peaceful luncheon. "The country will go back to the wilderness."

His companion said, "The country won't go back to the wilderness. But the people will."

"What'd you mean by that?"

"They'll go back to the land . . . they'll dig in with their hands and their backs the way our grandfathers did."

Stephen thought irritably, "The country is full of crazy talk. No wonder it has fallen to pieces. But we'll pull things together again. We need some clear thinking, and some new building. These old boys have lived their lives . . . *we'll* show 'em."

In their own rooms, Amoret would sit with her big embroidery frame drawn up before her, daintily plucking away with her needle while he read. Her small bright stitches were finer than snow, but sometimes she had needled in a whole half inch . . . scores of infinitesimal stitches, without once knowing what she was doing. Stephen read to her by the hour, rather desperately, because reading was easier than talking. She listened as intently as she could, but sometimes for whole long half-hours her mind slipped away into some private little pasture of its own. Sometimes she repeated the words from the codicil to Tobias' will. She naïvely supposed Tobias' bankruptcy had brought down this hush upon the entire city.

There is that maketh himself rich, and is poor. There is that maketh himself poor, and hath great riches.

She wondered what those words really meant. What *were* the great riches? She could not name them, but she knew some way that they had been the things Tobias had lived by, the strange, invisible forces which you felt when you were with him. The success of his life which Mr. Van Dyke had said must be seen by something besides the eye. . . .

Whenever Stephen stopped reading, she managed to look up, alert and bright, and to repeat his last two or three words questioningly. He read her everything he could get his hands on; everything, that is, except the packet of papers in his father's handwriting, or the big book, which he had refused to mention since he had found out what it was.

They dreamed about Mount Olympus, and pored over the beautiful map which Stephen had now fastened to the wall. They lived already in that little toy city, devoted to culture and kindness, where even the servants were going to be cared for altruistically and hygienically.

He read her about their Western journey in an advertising announcement in the *Public Ledger*, " 'Leech and Company's Packet Line from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.' "

"The Boats and Cars, during the winter, have been refitted, and are now in complete order; the cars have all been placed upon eight wheels to insure safety.' "

Amoret cried, "Good Heavens, darling! . . . are they dangerous?"

"No, my pet," Stephen said patiently. "How like a woman! The printing says 'safety' so you immediately translate that to mean 'danger.' " He went on reading, somewhat petulantly.

"The boats being large and commodious, afford every accommodation for the comfort and convenience of families traveling west; also, that persons can have their extra baggage on the same boat with themselves.' "

Amoret interrupted again. "That means I can take my harp?"

"Of course, my dear. We shall travel like gentlepeople, not emigrants."

He jotted down the address carefully so that he could book passage when he was ready. "Leech and Company's Packet Line, 41 Chestnut Street. Let me see, that would be about the corner of Chestnut and Water Streets. John Cameron, Agent."

All this made the trip seem imminent and possible. And suddenly a few days later it became even more imminent when the manager of the hotel, an unpleasant, yellow-toothed bumpkin, spoke quite impudently to Stephen about making a payment on account toward the accumulating bill for the suite.

Coming back upstairs to their rooms, Stephen considered

an excuse to move over to the Mansion House which was less expensive. But then he thought of a better move.

"You know, I've been thinking," he said, as he came in the door. "It would seem a bit kinder to me, since Horace and Harriet are worrying so much about their affairs, if we went over and had a visit with them before we started West."

"I'd love that," Amoret cried, knowing immediately all that he was not saying. "I love being alone with you, darling . . . but it does seem selfish, doesn't it?"

That is how it happened that they arrived at Horace's house at the very moment that a carriage had driven up and three strange men had got out looking ill and frightened. One of the men was Doctor Thomas W. Myott, who, suddenly finding himself in hot water, had come running to Horace for help. His bank, which was a private one, holding no charter, was suddenly threatened with fraudulent bankruptcy.

Horace, distraught at the very sight of these three visitors, had not even bothered taking them upstairs to his own library. Instead he had hustled them into the dining room, not even mumbling an apology to his family.

It was a terrible thing to hear a man crying hysterically behind the big folding doors of the dining room. It took all the good manners Amoret and Stephen had to pretend to Harriet they were not hearing it.

"All kinds of people flock here," Harriet said bluntly. "Mayor Swift came this morning . . . everybody thinks Horace can do something. . . ."

"He can," said Stephen almost grimly. "There's never been a moment in Horace's life when he couldn't do something."

It was just then that they heard the revolver shot from behind the folding doors. They looked at each other a long blank moment. It was Harriet who recovered first. She was out of her chair, and across the hall before anybody could stop her. She wrenched open the doors, and pushed them back; she even closed them behind her in a last desperate effort to deal with whatever was there, without shocking her husband's younger brother.

But Stephen was close behind her, and Amoret from sheer reflex was close behind Stephen.

Doctor Myott who had been hysterical a second before, was now frozen calm. Horace had fallen forward to his knees, the revolver still in his hand. Before anyone could reach him,

he had slumped the rest of the way, a huge black broadcloth mound that was making a hideous stain on the carpet.

"Hattie," he said in a choked whisper, "there wasn't anything else I could do. They'd have sent me to the penitentiary . . . I couldn't disgrace my family. . . ." He clutched her around the knees, and she slid down beside him murmuring and weeping. She was not a big woman, but at that moment she managed to gather most of him into her arms.

"Mr. Phelps . . . Mr. Phelps, dear . . ." she was moaning. "I could have taken care of you . . . I always could have taken care of you. Now what will I do with myself?"

But that purely rhetorical question was no concern of Horace's, for he was dead in her arms.

CHAPTER FOUR

That day on the railroad was an adventure, as everything one did with Stephen was an adventure. He had the ability to make a play of anything, so that you felt as if a curtain had just gone up on a stage, and you were a character in some exciting comedy.

In the Ladies' Car, Amoret was surprised to see how many women were unaccompanied by men. Where could they be going? What business could they possibly have without some man to be with them? It only showed how topsy-turvy the world had become in the last few months.

But even the women who were making the journey with their own husbands looked admiringly at her from under their sober traveling-bonnets. She knew they were not admiring *her*; the word in their round eyes when they looked at her was really "envy." Wherever she would go all the rest of her life, she would always be a woman at whom other women looked enviously and with that specific imagination with which women measure other women's men. It gave her a little thrill of insured complacency just thinking about how Stephen must appear to other women.

The train, rumbling along at a terrific speed . . . at least ten miles an hour, Stephen told her, darted through the green tunnel of trees. Flaming fragments from the burning wood in the locomotive blew up like sparks from a bonfire and sometimes set the trees afire.

Most of the Phelps's possessions would be following them by freight. But even so they had a great many grips, band boxes, carpet bags, and even crates of Stephen's precious books, and the rolled-up horn of plenty which was the map of Mount Olympus. They clung to this even after the train officials had taken away the rest of the baggage. Unconsciously they admitted by their very tenacity that this map was their strong central fact in the midst of all this swiftly unfurling change.

Amoret had expected that her beloved harp, so much a part of her own self, would travel right along with them. But

at the last moment the agent of Leeches said this was really out of the question. The harp would be much safer, he said, coming by wagon; it would take only about two months, if everything went well.

"By that time, darling, we shall have our own drawing room all ready to receive it," Stephen had said to her.

Such things as they did have with them, however, were tied in the racks at the top of the flying brigade of cars, cheek by jowl with the crude, untidy baggage of some of the other passengers.

Stephen took care of everything . . . except one item. Amoret herself had got stout brown wrapping paper, and had made a large but not too heavy bundle of Tobias' inheritance to his son. As far as anything Stephen said was concerned, the whole parcel might have been fashioned of invisible air like a burden in a fairy tale. He never once mentioned it; from this she knew that he quite well understood what it was she held so bulkily in her arms, under her traveling cape. She had tried a number of times to talk to him about those two gifts, but the whole subject distressed him so much that she had decided never to mention it again, until he asked about it himself.

The car, looking like nothing so much as a narrow long potting shed such as a gardener might work in, was unbearably hot. The windows spaced down the dingy wooden length of the walls, were sooted over and cobwebbed with that ugly fabric spun from restless air and dust. Even though this was nearly June, a fat tubby stove burned in the rear of the car. Heat waves shimmered over everything, and this, combined with the shattering rumble of the car as it lunged along on its eight wheels over the iron-rimmed wooden rails of the track, made you feel as if you must be inside a kettle for parching corn. Between overstuffing the stove, the stoker straddled up and down the narrow aisle which ran between the parallel crosswise seats of the car, calling out the names of delicacies which struck Amoret as being next to nauseating.

"Cinnamon cakes, ladies and gentlemen, baked potatoes, bananas, cheese muffins, peppermint drops." All his transactions were carried on at the top of his lungs, so that hour after hour you couldn't help following everybody's reckless gastronomic gymnastics. You knew exactly what everyone had eaten . . . the little Irishman in the shawl had had four

potatoes, a dripping slice of roast beef, a huge slab of johnny-cake, and now he was negotiating for a banana.

When the brigade passed through the towns the streets were all waiting for them as if they were a circus parade; open-eyed, open-mouthed people waving with joy were lined along the track as it crossed Main Street. Quite obviously the passing of the train was the event of the day. Horses plunged and reared, with their eyes crossed and their mouths foaming; pigs wallowed and scuffled dangerously close to the tracks; children, beside themselves with delight, screamed and waved their little hats. Amoret being a kindhearted little thing, couldn't help smiling and waving from the window. But by late afternoon Stephen was weary of it all. He sat bolt upright, scowling and dark, pretending not to notice the vulgar excitement.

There were many things they had intended to talk about. Amoret had pictured them sitting quietly in the car, summing up the last hectic days in Philadelphia quietly and neatly, as you might sort out a rag-bag, throwing away useless scraps, and tying other items into bundles. But somehow as the hours crawled along on that first slow day of railroad travel, and Philadelphia faded farther and farther away from them, there seemed less and less to say about it. After a few hours on the railroad there was a terrifying unreality about the whole already lived portion of her life. If she had not had her husband sitting beside her where she could tuck her fingers occasionally into the crook of his elbow and make sure that he would turn and smile down at her and thus create in his own image and likeness her old world again, Amoret could have seen how it would have been possible for her to have lost herself completely. A journey carrying you inescapably out beyond the sight of everything you know, could be a very dangerous thing unless you clung fast. You might get off at the end quite a different woman from the one who had stepped aboard and waved good-bye to tearful friends wishing you bon voyage.

The leave-taking had been painful for the whole family. All of them realized it was a wonderful investment Stephen had made. Of the whole group who had come to say good-bye, Mr. Van Dyke had seemed most affected by their going. The sad old oyster-colored eyes had been full of tears when Amoret stood on tiptoe and kissed him. Mrs. Durkee, too, had

wept. She was going to live in Harriet's boarding and rooming house until Stephen sent for her to come and help them in their new home.

Nobody could quite believe they were going forever. Persons who had been born in Philadelphia, and who had made their lives out of its beautiful routine, out of its grace and orderliness, simply did not leave. Yet Amoret knew that probably they would never come back. Stephen could never return to Philadelphia after the double shame in his family. He was too proud even to admit how disgraced he felt; but Amoret understood.

"I could never hold up my head again," he said. "I could never offer my friends hospitality . . . I could never accept a mouthful from them. My father a bankrupt, my brother a suicide to escape criminal charges against his bank . . ."

No, they would never come back; there was nothing to come back to. These were terrible and wonderful words . . . an island of words that cut you off from everything you ever had known as safe and certain and expected. But the words were not really an island; the words were a bridge. The shape of the words implied really that life lay only ahead, with nothing to look back upon with longing.

Everyone in the car talked to everyone else; it was a noisy convivial place, full of excitement and the adventure which comes from not knowing exactly what lies ahead. Each person was on a bridge of his own, one end standing in the past which was disappearing, and the other leading into a mist through which nothing was yet plain. No wonder they were all talking nervously, and laughing too much and eating too much.

In the middle of the afternoon they passed through Lancaster, and at six they reached Columbia, the railroad terminus, and the end of this first chapter of the long trip. It was difficult to realize that they had covered nearly eighty-two miles in just one day! But, fast as they were going, it would be a long and complicated trip.

Everyone's face was grimy, and some people were complaining and angry because the cinders had burned holes in their clothes, but Stephen said this was just one of the hazards of modern travel. One frantic woman said over and over that she was going to take it into court. She had a huge singed splotch to back up her indignation, and she kept going

around and thrusting her billowing bosom under people's noses, and asking them what they thought the railroad ought to do about it.

Everyone was tired and some were cross, and it was a good thing to be getting out of the car and walking around on the side of the railroad track. The rough dusty streets of Columbia were full of teams and of people whose business was concerned with the transfer of passengers and freight from railroad to canal. There was bustling excitement and laughter and noise. Lamplight spilled out of the restaurants and cafés. You could see through the twilight the signs on the rooming houses.

Single Bed and Breakfast, 25¢.
Man and Wife, 40¢.

Some of the canal boats had a very bad reputation, if you listened to the canal missionaries. But the life was a lazy one, and when hours are long, liquor is sometimes the shortest distance between two points. The canalers were supposed to have prodigious capacities for rum, and they stoutly believed that they could drink all night and in the morning be steady as an eight-day clock.

"Haf to be," one old boatman was explaining to an interested passenger. "Cap'n Kutten don't allow no drunkenness on board his boat. Nope. Don't min' drinkin', but don't allow no drunkennesss."

Stephen was quite indignant because the liquor was so plentiful and so cheap in the rum shops. The poor should be protected, he thought, by reasonably prohibitive prices. He and a gentleman from Baltimore talked about it. The Baltimorean said that at the taverns along the canal whisky was only two bits a quart, and applejack was even cheaper. At every one of the hundred and eight locks along the way good whiskey was offered to the boatmen, if their captain would allow it, at a fip a half-pint. And blackstrap, he said, that fiery rum and molasses which was the favorite drink of the boatmen, cost half as much, three cents per water glass full. "Why, sir, at some of the smaller taverns, I've seen a barrel of Medford and molasses, sitting at the door, where any guest coming in or going out, could help himself free."

Stephen made up his mind that when he reached Mount

Olympus he would write a letter to his friend Wycliff Barrows, a member of the Pennsylvania state legislature, and see if something couldn't be done about that. After all, that was what travel was for, to give a public-spirited man the information necessary to help improve conditions. . . .

Ticket mongers were running about among the passengers, selling bookings on the various packet boats.

"Book on the *Hattie and Mattie*, folks . . . the finest and best. Costs no more, sir. Gives ye somethin' to remember. *Hattie and Mattie* right here, folks . . . the packet boat you've heard about . . . right here."

"Free drinks and accordeen music on the *Uncle Jonathan*, mister. We aim to keep our passengers merry and happy. Right this way for *Uncle Jonathan*."

Stephen had taken care of their entire booking before they left Philadelphia. The travel agent had said that the best packet boat was unquestionably the *Bluebell Lady*, with Captain Timothy Breen, so their passage was secure on that. Stephen would always take care of everything far in advance, so that when they arrived anywhere they would always be expected and welcomed and prepared for.

Everyone, even the most ignorant person, was excited about this journey, for it represented something so modern and new and daring that you couldn't help feeling that by participating you had a part in the destiny of the future. Amoret had often heard Stephen talking eloquently at his own or some friend's dinner table, about the wonderful canal system of their state. He believed that the Pennsylvania canals would give the Erie system great competition.

"Eventually the whole country will be crossed and recrossed by a lacework of canals," Stephen said. "Some day the world will understand the vision those men saw . . . James Geddes, and Benjamin Wright. . . . What the men who wrote the Constitution did for government, these men did for transportation. Some day we'll realize that the history of this country of ours is going to be written in travel and freight haul."

Amoret learned from Stephen that the railroad over which they had just passed had taken the State nearly six years to build, but it showed what could be done in this country when the Government really got behind an enterprise. Just as people called George Washington the father of his country, you

might very well call the Columbia Line the father of the railroads. In the beginning the track had been a public highway, just as the canals were public highways. Anyone who wished could put on his own teams and drivers and operate the vehicles any way he pleased, on payment of tolls. But that had not been practical. Brawls and quarrels had finally forced the State to work out another method. For three years now the State had run the line properly. Horses were forbidden on the tracks, and now everything was drawn by locomotives, and it was all very modern and smooth.

Here where the railroad ended, the canal began, and it would run one hundred and seventy-two miles along the east bank of the Susquehanna River. There was little to see of the canal now, for it was quite dark by the time they boarded the *Bluebell Lady*. She looked gay indeed, with her white cabin house surmounted by the railed deck. Benches and even tables were set about this flat roof-deck, making it look almost like a garden fête. Colored lanterns were strung from poles, and in a corner a darky brass band was playing exuberantly. A pickaninny in a pink frock was dancing to the music, her bright eyes flashing and her wide mouth grinning as her bare feet flew and tapped on the deck. Passengers were grouped about, discreetly getting acquainted. Some of the women were wearing full rustling silk dresses, which billowed out in the breeze, their folds catching the splash of the lanterns in glowing highlight. Sweating, grunting blacks were loading provisions on the rear of the boat. But above them on the passenger deck, everything was gay white paint, and color, and the blaring of music. Why, the whole scene looked like a holiday!

But as the evening wore on, the scene became much more somber, and before ten o'clock the brass band had folded up its noise and had shuffled away into the darkness. The Leech Company workmen had taken down the festive-looking lanterns and put them in a little shed until tomorrow when a new crop of passengers would arrive, needing to be heartened with a cheery send-off. One by one the passengers had gone below into the cabin house, and a gloomy stillness had settled upon the whole place. The townspeople had gone home; the very stray dogs which had run about friskily had found some place to creep in for the night, and even the "ac-cordeen" wheezing away in the town saloon was quiet. Only

the frogs, the innumerable two-noted frogs, plucked away on the fiddle-string of silence. The *Bluebell Lady* seemed what she was now, only a barge with a big clumsy barn crazily set in the middle of her.

Something Amoret had not expected happened. She naturally had assumed that she and her husband would be given some little cubicle of their own in which to sleep. But suddenly she found that this was a hope far from reality. Indeed there was no privacy anywhere on the canal boat. The whole matter of sleeping was very crudely handled. There was what was erroneously and roguishly called the "Ladies' Cabin," a space temporarily divided from the rest of the room by a coarse brown curtain, which shut off the sights but not the sounds from the other side. You could hear the men, uncouth animal-like men they seemed to be, taking off their shoes, yawning, stretching, snapping their elastic galluses against their giant chests, and scratching with male abandon. If the cabin was shaped like a barn, it sounded like a barnyard. There were noises which Amoret in her delicacy refused to identify.

The ladies who had looked picturesque and interesting when they had stood on the lantern-lighted deck with their skirts blowing in the twilight, turned out to be coarse, simple women. As soon as they found out what they were expected to do, they did it heartily. One buxom matron standing in the center of the curtained-off space, peeled off one starched embroidered petticoat after another until she stood frankly in her bulky drawers, looking around good-naturedly at the women who were modestly unfastening their stays under their clothes.

"Hand me my night-dress, somebody," she said. "Nothing to be ashamed about. We're all the way the Lord made us." She wrapped her mountainous clothes inside of her cloak so that it looked like an effigy of herself, and then selecting what she thought was going to be the most comfortable of the pallets which the stewardess had spread out on the bare floor, she lowered herself groaningly to her knees and took the Lord, of whose handiwork she was not ashamed, into her confidence.

"Dear Lord, keep anything from happening to this here boat. At least as long as Mr. Sparks and me are upon it. Prosper Mamma and Papa back in Maryland, and lay your finger

on our own lives wherever we go from here on. Bless our enemies, dear Lord, and punish them for their evil doings. Take care of us all for Jesus. Amen."

She then sat down on the pallet and spoke in about the same tone of voice to those who were more visibly present than the Lord had been. "My, this is awful hard. I hope you ladies can sleep on anything. Personally I'm a heavy sleeper, and I might as well tell you now that when I sleep, I snore. I hope that's going to be all right with you-all."

Apparently there were many on the boat to whom sleeping and snoring were synonyms, for already a symphony of snores came through the brown curtain, little flute notes and big drum beats and the steady rumbling of the plain-snorers who rock and saw with monotonous diligence.

Amoret could still hear the roustabouts thumping and banging the crates and boxes and baggage about, hauling them onto the deck, and spitting noisily into the water with every heave, as if the spitting gave them strength. She knew that the last vestige of festivity was being removed from the deck; from here on, everything would be whittled down to strict utility.

She lay carefully in her clothes which she could not take off because there seemed no clean place to lay them. She did not allow herself to wriggle or turn; she mustn't be too wrinkled in the morning when Stephen saw her. It was the first night she had ever slept in the room with a stranger, and here she was with twelve. She had never felt so forlorn in her life. . . .

She woke up suddenly, not knowing where she was. She heard the muleteers hitching the mules to the boat and starting them off. The rudder was groaning with a loud crunching protest. The boat was moving now, slow and awkward as an elephant, wallowing against the very banks of the canal.

The new life had begun.

(2)

As soon as daylight came, everyone was up, restless with new energy. Last night the boat had seemed subdued, but now it was bursting with life and good nature. Everyone was eager to be stirring about and to get on deck to inspect the

country through which they were floating. The children, half-dressed and noisy, were running about, bumping into people as they dived under piles of clothes and over pallets looking for their shoes or their underdrawers. The whole place was bedlam in deshabille. The women who had forgotten to bring their own combs and brushes unblushingly borrowed from their neighbors. Amoret, sped on by her fastidiousness, was the first person in the Ladies' Cabin to be ready to go out, but it was impossible for her to emerge from behind the brown curtain until everything on both sides had been pronounced in readiness. She had to wait impatiently, with her back turned upon the democratic boudoir. Every once in a while the stewardess, a pink-faced lusty jade, would call out over the curtain:

"How about it, gentlemen, are you ready to receive the ladies?" Back would come a chorus of masculine humor, verging on the ribald.

It would all have been shocking if it hadn't been so outrageous and so innocently simple-minded. But at last everybody was said to be "decent," the brown curtains were flung back, and a rush of families from both sides greeted each other heartily and affectionately as if they had been parted for weeks instead of hours.

The counterpart of the woman in the bulky, pious drawers prodded his spouse meaningly in the ribs. "How'd you sleep, Mrs. Sparks, without your old man beside you to comfort you?" he bawled jovially.

"I never had a better night, Mr. Sparks," she said, bridling waggishly. "There's a lot to be said in favor of canal-boat traveling."

Already the boat crew were carrying away the remnants of the night, bundling up the blankets and pillows, clapping together the flimsy boards upon which passengers had been laid one above the other like merchandise on a store's shelves. They were pulling out small tables and setting them in rows along each side of the cabin. A bar, toward which none of the ladies glanced, was already functioning busily in one end of the boat. Gentlemen were standing there having a morning pick-me-up, behaving as if they were completely invisible. An hypothesis of invisibility was apparently the only amenity of canal-boat travel! A galley boy came staggering out with a huge tureen of stew. A curl of fragrance rose from it, and

mingled with the assorted odors of the overheated small room.

Without a word, Stephen put his arm quickly around Amoret and led her outside where they could be momentarily alone. It was the most beautiful morning anyone ever had seen. You could almost smell the sky, so new and sweet it was. The blue of it shone like the cupped curve of a tulip petal. The narrow highway of water slipped along between the sparkling, dew-laden banks. Trees, which must have been as old as the earth, were decked in fresh leaves, still crumpled from being so recently folded into buds. In the sunlight every weed stood out in adolescent innocence as if God had especially designed it for this moment. Ferns, long-legged and just uncurling, were carved like the graceful head of a violin; the silver-downed leaves of the milkweed were so new they were more like flowers than leaves.

However strange and unfamiliar everything in the cabin was, out here you *couldn't* be uncomfortable about anything. You could only feel in your heart a great fountain of joy tingling through you. Seeing the crude beautiful earth just coming past bud into leaf, Amoret caught a shimmering sudden understanding of the people in the cabin. Like the earth itself, they had not quite begun to have the grace of growth softening their harsh outlines.

But some day they would have that grace . . . perhaps not these very persons, but certainly their seeds. . . . Humans grew more slowly than trees; the seasons of growth formed a larger, slower circle. Perhaps a generation represented only a year. . . . Perhaps a generation was even less than that . . . only a stark day or so in the winter of the race. God was planning a forest, and these were but the angular saplings. You yourself were only a simple, graceless shoot. Naked and bare, a gauche young sprout shivered in the center of your mind; it gave no hint of what you must become. But you knew . . . you could not help knowing . . . that something rich and complicated would form upon that bare blade of liveness.

You could not look at anything just through the small key-hole of now. You must trust and watch and wait for the inevitable outline to appear. Never again would she turn away in disgust from the growing. However crude, however ugly it looked now, it was on its way to something beautiful. When

you looked, you must do it in the larger way, from the height of time. Not ignoring the imperfect now, but including the coming *then*. The God's-eye view must be yours.

She wanted to say all this somehow to Stephen, but she didn't know where to begin. You couldn't say, "Darling, I love the people God made . . . those funny, unbathed, good people. I *see* through them, Stephen. . . ."

She couldn't say anything like that. It was part of her budless gaucherie that she had no words. But Stephen was finding something to say. "Precious, I worried about you all night," he said. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her in that strange almost-fatherly way he sometimes assumed when he was preparing to impress something serious upon her. "This journey is going to last two weeks, Amoret. We can go through it in a difficult and uncomfortable and bitter way, or we can do it easily."

He was going to tell her in his words, what *she* was unable to tell him! Her wonderful Stephen who knew everything . . . and could tell it so well!

"Yes . . . yes," she said eagerly.

"We can make believe it is all just a play that we are seeing. One of those vulgar noisy plays like Kit Marlowe used to write."

He looked down into her face, her eyes faintly smudged with the violet of weariness, the coppery hair vibrant in the sunshine. This was difficult for her; she had lived always within a silken circumstance; he must make it a game for her somehow. He knew she would believe what he told her, and try to bend her feelings into whatever shape he proposed. But he mustn't talk over her head. She had never heard of Kit Marlowe, of course. She probably assumed he was one of Stephen's classmates at the College of New Jersey.

"We can make up our minds that nothing that happens is going to feel real or offensive to us. We'll just keep thinking about our new home ahead . . . and meantime we'll be watching a play. When we're among our own people we shall have amazing and amusing things to tell about."

Her face between his hands, was flooded with color. Her eyes were wide and excited, and her breath came fast. But she looked as if she were going to weep.

"Will you try to do it this way, darling? Will you try not to let it disgust you too much . . . be too unbearable?"

"But it isn't unbearable," Amoret said. "It isn't unbearable at all."

He dropped his hands in surprise, and then he looked at her with great admiration.

"My darling, you are a thoroughbred." He leaned down and kissed her tenderly. In a flash Amoret remembered that quick moment the morning the will was read. This was like that. "I was almost forgetting that you come from one of the finest families of Massachusetts," he was saying.

Once again he had completely misinterpreted her. He had read her honest pleasure as quick gallant adapting to necessity. He was admiring her not for valid reasons, but because he believed she had nimbly adjusted her womanly repulsion into behavior which he had decided would be the admirable and patrician attitude.

"We understand each other perfectly," he said, much moved. "The longer I live with you, Amoret, the more I love and admire you."

She bent her head so he could not see her eyes. She felt lost and perplexed . . . more alone and forlorn than she had felt last night in the Ladies' Cabin. Her ecstasy of a moment before had dissolved into nameless despair.

All the poetry and mystery and that intuitive prescience which had so lifted her heart, was gone. The italic beauty of the forest, each weed standing up in self-declaration, was blurred into common print. The light of meaning had gone out of it all, and only a tangle of common growth was left.

This marriage of hers, so magically mated to her need . . . was that, too, only a second's mirage of the beauty of two matched arcs in flight above the earth?

She thought confusedly to herself, "He is married to one woman, but I am quite another. What will become of us?"

It was a question as devastating as an earthquake, and as completely without warning. From below the gardened surface of her marriage a primitive unanswerable rumbling had shaken her earth. But Stephen had not heard it.

They went back into the cabin, and now the long rows of tables groaned and sagged almost to bow-leggedness with the weight of the food piled upon them. Ham, hardboiled eggs, beefsteak, kidney stew, pickles, pie, doughnuts . . . everything any appetite could think of, was heaped upon the center of the tables, and around the sides were already seated the

rollicking noisy passengers, dipping freely into the bowls and gulping down their choices.

"Eat hearty, folks," cried Captain Timothy Breen. "Leeches and Company don't want nobody to be hungry on *their* packet boats."

"If they've got an arm, let 'em reach," shouted out a farmer over a mouthful of potatoes and kidney stew. "That's what I always say. It's a good rule for any place . . . bed or board. If you've got an arm, go ahead and reach."

"Let me help you, my friend," Stephen himself cried, and heaping up a grotesque platter of food, he awarded it to the shouter.

The table roared with delight and pounded applause for Stephen with their spoons. Before that first meal was over, everyone had become his willing admirer. Amoret had seen this happen before among his own kind of people, when a room suddenly seemed not a room in an everyday house, but the setting for a delightful comedy. On this crowded, evil-smelling canal boat he was wielding his old talent for pleasing people and making them feel themselves more winsome than they ever before had been.

Under Amoret's entranced eyes a new Stephen emerged, a roistering and witty François Villon kind of vagabond, whose actions apologized for the fact that his clothes were better than theirs; who wore his elegance indeed, only as a mocking disguise for the mischievous lovable scamp within. His nimble wit ran ahead of their clumsy clodhopping, but always in the direction they had indicated, so that there was never the slightest rebuke in his fun. He did what they did, only better and with a flippant, mocking delicacy which gave them a flattering picture of themselves, lifted out of the realm of crudity into a new area of charm.

He had written himself a part in a roguish play, and had indicated for them amusing characters which they also might become. They saw themselves suddenly as gay adventurers, and not as doltish ugly humans with work-lined, warty faces and misshapen, black-nailed hands, pushed out by adversity into some unknown wilderness. They looked into Stephen and saw themselves, mistaking the mirror for the reflection.

Nor did he tire of the game, as the hours went on. He threw himself unreservedly into the life of the boat, and just when everyone was weary and edgy from being confined

within a small space, he whipped things into fun again. Once he got up a quick square dance; again the children pranced behind him acting out a charade, and finally their elders joined in. He dared an impromptu play with these people, many of whom had never seen a theater.

Before the second day had passed, he was the Pied Piper of the boat, and there wasn't a man, woman, or child who wasn't willing to follow his beckoning anywhere. You couldn't help knowing that as long as these people lived, they would sit on their doorsteps after the day's work was done, telling their neighbors about this wonderful play-acting man who had pushed back one wall in their minds to show them, for those few days at least, that living can be a lot of nonsensical fun.

Like the children they were, the passengers couldn't do enough for Stephen. They fought over who would sit next to him at the table. Though Stephen did not tell her so, someone else divulged the fact to Amoret that the men had insisted upon making up a bed for him on one of the tables so that his tall length wouldn't be cramped on the sleeping-shelves where they themselves huddled during the night.

A nearly toothless little woman knitted him a cravat, a woolly lumpy monstrosity, which he accepted with so much grace that the last drop of blood welled up from the giver's heels and flooded her face with pleasure.

All this left Amoret more than ever enslaved by her husband's charm.

"I love them," she said to herself wonderingly, "but I am tongue-tied and bashful with them. *He* knows how to give them something they've never had before." She thought her heart would burst with humbleness, because this aristocratic husband of hers loved these tired-looking common people enough to exert himself so that this tedious trip would be for them an unforgettable adventure. *She* thought about loving people; *he* put the love into action. She made up her mind that never again would she doubt Stephen's perfectness; never again would she allow her smallness to mis-measure his greatness.

On the whole, the trip was not unbearable for anyone, although the nights seemed hideously long to Amoret. Once the day was finally set upon its reeling feet, the hours passed

swiftly. Friendliness was the very weather, no respecter of persons.

The boat was traveling only a little faster than a person could walk; four miles per hour was the average speed. It floated as noiselessly as a boat in a dream. Twenty-five yards or so down the tow-path the three dappled mules loped along, swaying their hips from side to side with almost Castilian grace. The bell on the lead-mule nodded along, a repeated drop of sound, dripping away the minutes as if time were a candle. Passengers often walked between the locks, letting the boat get out of sight ahead of them but knowing that they would overtake it again at the next lock.

The first day few of the women walked along the tow-path, being hampered by their shoes. But by the second day many of them took off their shoes, admitting by the gesture that they were farm women whose soles had long ago made friends with dust and pebbles. They strode along happily; their stays abandoned with their city traveling dresses. They wore calico now, and sunbonnets out of which their honest good faces beamed, dusty and demure. They sang sometimes, and tucked up their skirts so they could swing along, like children on their way to school. Musical instruments came out of the baggage, and decks of cards, and everyone took to his own habitual amusement, the talkers talking, the gamblers huddling over their cards, and the men with paunches waiting eagerly from meal to meal.

There was always something to see along the way, a slowly unrolling panorama of forest and farms and squalid little villages. The canal wound within sight of the Susquehanna and ran along beside it for awhile, and then the lazy river swerved off on some mysterious errand through the valley and disappeared. At Harrisburg the canal crossed the river through a long covered bridge, with the mulepaths built on two-storied galleries, so that boats traveling in opposite directions might pass.

There were two classes of passengers on the boat; the hard-working settlers with backs already bent with the toil which had purchased this passage and this adventure, and the well-dressed and debonair men like Stephen, who had florid faith in this West toward which their faces were turned. But both types had one great bond in common—ex-

pectation of wonderful things to come. The difference was that one group expected to live by their wits, while the other was willing to live by work.

Where the numerous bridges crossed the canal, they often saw a pageant passing. A big Conestoga wagon and dusty horses, and straggling behind it, one or two families. Stephen often called out to these families with imaginative compassion, knowing how gay and grand the canal boat must look to them. He flung them a bright coin of conversation, realizing they would spend it over and over again.

"Where you headed for, partner?" he would call, and they would shout back, naïvely pleased that he was speaking to them.

"Expect you're goin' to Saint Louis, ain't you mister? You look like a Saint Louis banker, I expect."

"Nope," Stephen called back. "We're on our way to Mount Olympus, Illinois. Heard about it, friend?"

"Cain't say as I have. But that don't mean nothin', mister. I'm a man who ain't hardly ever heard about nuthin'."

Sometimes the travelers *had* heard of it.

"Seems to me I did hear tell of Mount Olympus. Kind of a new city, ain't it? Well, good luck to you, sir."

Stephen, his eyes bright with the game, enjoyed this comradely shouting back and forth. Sometimes he said to Amoret (quietly, so the other passengers would feel no distance between the Phelps and themselves), "There they go . . . they may be our very servants, darling, on their way to work in our gardens when we're ready to build Wide Acres again. It's like a great exciting pageant, isn't it? I keep thinking these travelers have been written by Chaucer! Gad, it's wonderful to watch, isn't it?"

(3)

When Amoret first saw the Martins, she thought they all looked like old people. They were poor; they did not even have a Conestoga wagon; they had only an open dray, heaped with what looked like refuse but was, of course, their household treasures. The horse that pulled it was as thin as they were. He had a tangled burr-tortured mane and shaggy

fetlocks, and a sad sag to his belly. An old woman, faceless in a sunbonnet, was driving the horse, and a small child, limp in the abandon of sleep, was flung down upon the load of household trash.

The rest of the family, a tall gangling man and a skinny bird-like woman, walked beside the rickety wagon while three other children drooped behind them listlessly. Amoret, sitting in a rope swing under one of the big elms outside the last lock tavern before the *Bluebell Lady* reached Hollidaysburg, watched them coming down the wayward road that stumbled over the bridge leading across the canal. Something was wrong with the machinery of the lock, and workers were hammering away at the repairing. They might finish in five minutes, or it might take the rest of the morning.

The wagon lumbered to a stop before the inn gate; the man reached up and lifted down the old woman from the seat, and the children came running across the grass to the well which ornamented the place. The horse put out his weary neck and began cropping the grass of the lawn. As the rest of the family came tiredly over the slope of the grass, thirst stamped on their faces, Amoret saw that the man and woman were young. She got up from the swing and went over to the well, irresistibly drawn to knowing them.

"My, ain't it hot?" the younger woman said, and took off her sunbonnet and ran her finger through her damp, tired-looking hair. "This weather ain't fitten for any critter but a snake, and no mistake." She grinned at Amoret with shy friendliness.

"This ain't so hot, Myrtle," said her husband. "We seen hotter many's the time. Pay her no mind, lady. She's come up from Georgia where the weather's so hot you git blisters on the insides of your bones, efn' you ain't careful."

He threw his arm roughly around his wife's shoulders, and smiled down at her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. The children said, "Momma, this ain't hot. This here's lovely."

The woman turned her face away from her family and looked at Amoret, giving her a knowingly, sisterly wink, and Amoret saw then that her method of making the weather seem cooler to her family was for them to convince themselves by their own protests.

They all sat down on the stone wall, and drank round after round of the cool tinny-tasting water from the dipper. The children pulled up the dripping wooden bucket, and ran back and forth with the dipper, delighted to be doing something useful and important.

"My, this here is certain'y good," they all said over and over, and smacked their lips and flicked off a spray of drops with their forefingers.

The old woman took off her shoes, and pouring some water tidily from the dipper onto a grimy handkerchief, she bathed her dusty feet.

"I don't ask nothin' better from heaven," she said cheerfully, "than to set down after a good dusty walk and put my feet into nice cool water."

The father said, "Don't you be worrying about heaven, Ma. It's goin' t'be a long time afore us'uns lets you sneak off to heaven. We got plenty of work for you-all to do first." They each—even the baby—looked at her with heartbreaking fondness, but they covered it over quickly with casualness, as if they could not bear to link even in a joke the words "Gramma" and "heaven."

"I was jest a-jokin'," the old woman said. "I 'spect to be aroun' makin' a nuisance of myself long after you-all are dead and buried."

Like all the people Amoret had met upon this trip, the Martins loved to talk. They talked as they breathed, without conscious effort or thought. They listened to themselves and each other, no more than birds listen when they all chirp. Talk was one thing they all could afford. It was the only luxury which was entirely democratic in this land of the free, and they made the most of it, telling Amoret about the rented farm they had left and their wonderful hopes for the future. It was the same old story, smoke blowing westward and building palaces in the sky.

While they were talking the innkeeper came out and made a curt dismissing gesture.

"Keep moving along there, friends. Unless you wish to avail your selves of the facilities of the inn," he called out.

Martin stood up and bowed sardonically. "That's all right, Mr. Rich Man," Martin said. "We ain't hurtin' your old facilities none. We don't like *you* any better than you like us."

Myrtle said, "Poppa, don't talk to him thataway. He jest don't know no better, that's all. He jest ain't heard that the Lord gave the earth to all of us to be happy on."

Joe Martin's rugged face was full of angry shame. A man didn't have no right making another man small before his family.

"Efn' I had two bits to spend on hard likker he'd be bowing and scrapin'. A honest man don't mean nuthin' to folks lessen he's got somethin' to spend with 'em."

"Now, Poppa, don't trouble yours'f," his wife said soothingly. "Us'un will go over and have our dinner now and enjoy ourse'fs. Won't you come along with us and share what victuals we got, Miz Phelps?"

"I'd love to," Amoret said unexpectedly. "If you're sure I won't be intruding in any way."

"Intrudin'!" cried Martin. "I rightly don't know what that word means, but I'm pretty sure you ain't goin' be doin' it." He flushed with gratitude because he had been restored to his own stature by a chance to be generous. A man couldn't be considered poor if he could give somethin'. "Lady, you couldn't do nuthin' that wouldn't jes' be purty and sweet."

They prodded up the tired old horse again, and drove up the road a short distance. The road, vague and stony, bent its back where the roll of the land shoved it away from the canal. Amoret thought, "I mustn't go too far away. Stephen won't know where I am. . . ." But the road looked so innocent and the Martins were so glad to have her that she just kept walking along with them, holding onto the smallest child's hand.

"This here's a right pretty place, Mamma," the little boy cried, as they rounded a corner and came upon a pasture that lay on the lap of a hill.

Everyone was tickled to death because Amoret was with them. "We ain't had comp'ny since we left home," Gramma said. "People like us set right smart store by comp'ny."

They took from the wagon a split rush basket, clanking with iron cooking utensils, and a few pokes of meal and dried beans and a bouquet of wilted-looking turnips.

"We was aimin' to eat these here greens fer supper, but I don't know but what they'd be mighty nice to have right now," Mrs. Martin said hospitably. The oldest boy, who was

lugging along a pail of water from the well, was already slopping some of it into the iron kettle, and Gramma was stirring in salt with a spoon.

"I'm goin' make you chillun the best mush you ever et."

"That's what she says every day," the little boy told Amoret. "Same old mush every day, but it's allus the best we ever et."

"Well, it is, ain't it?" Gramma said, and shrieked with mirth.

They had a fire going in a little while, and the black iron kettle squatted down among the flames while the family waited happily for it to boil. Joe Martin took out of the wagon a homemade banjo. It was a crude box with a copper cooking pan set inside to give resonance. A long neck was attached to the box, and two or three twangy strings were stretched across, with nails to tighten them by.

"Don' git the notion this here is a *banjo*," he said, winking at Amoret. "This is my own invention. I call it—"

"He calls it a panjoe," the little boy shouted boastfully, and the children went into gales of delight.

"Nev' mind what he calls it," Mrs. Martin said proudly. "He sure can git purty music outen it."

"You go awn, Myrtle! Miz Phelps'll think you're braggin' 'bout your old man," Joe said bashfully, his face reddening with pleasure.

He struck up several chords on the comical-looking instrument, and then in a rusty, lusty voice he began to sing:

*"If you want to make a hoe-cake
Or a Johnny cake the same,
You wrop the dough on a little boy's heel
And bake it over the flame."*

The children, tired from the walk, lay back on the ground with their hands clasped under their heads, looking up at the sky and smiling dreamily to themselves. You couldn't be skeared of anything when you had a pappy that could sing that good. He could get mad when he had to, and that was right; somethin' like thunder in the sky. And then he could sing, and it was like God rockin' the world in a hammock and singin' it a lullaby.

Amoret herself lay back with them, and she, too, smiled,

for she was happy and at home and pleased with herself for having struck up an acquaintance with strangers entirely on her own, without the assistance of Stephen or of anyone else. She wanted as she had never wanted before, to do something for these people, to give them something, or work for them, in some way . . . But she could think of nothing she could give them, for in spite of all their poverty, there seemed nothing they really knew they lacked.

When at last the simple meal was cooked, and they crowded around the fire ready with their earthenware plates and iron spoons, Joe took off his hat and they bowed their heads, before they so much as dished up the mush and turnip greens.

"Father up there, we sure thank you for everything you give us down here. Amen," Joe said.

They all said "Amen," all except Amoret, who never had heard such a word spoken outside a fashionable church.

"Well, eat up, everybody. It ain't much, but I know it's goin' taste good, because it was cooked with gratitude and it was served with grace," Mrs. Martin said gently.

When the last of the slimy turnip greens had disappeared, Joe produced some nubby-looking little apples which somebody must have tossed him from last year's crop. He had them hidden away, wrapped in a piece of old blue calico, and you could see he had saved them for a moment when the Martins needed something special.

"By cracky, there just ain't no limit to the good things the Lord gives the Martins!" Gramma said, biting carefully into hers, and tactfully avoiding the rotten spots, as if they were a futile attempt to disparage the bounteous providing.

They washed up the dishes with what was left of the water in the pail, and then the children were ready for some sport. Joe found a little rock and used it to pound two iron spikes into the pasture, then the family divided itself into teams and resumed an old horseshoe tournament. Mamma and Freddie against Sara and Papa. The two smallest children ran around independently playing their own mysterious little dramas, and Gramma and Amoret sat apart under a tree and watched.

"I keep wishing I had something nice I could give you people," Amoret said impulsively.

"Why, we don't need nothin', honey!" Gramma said.

"But I might have a dress or a coat that Myrtle could cut

up and make into clothes for the children . . . or something," Amoret faltered. The old woman put her knobby hand tenderly over Amoret's.

"I know, honey. You think we need some kind of help. But we don't need *nothin'*. We got our hands God gave us, and they'll git us anything we need. Our hands outside and our hearts inside to tell 'em what to do."

She was rocking back and forth almost as if she had rocked so many children in her arms that she had quite forgotten that now they were empty. "That's what made Ameriky, Miz Phelps, hands and hearts workin' together to do God's biddin'."

She was saying exactly what Tobias had tried to say with all his life and with that unwelcome will! This old woman with the bent and twisted body possessed the heritage which Tobias had wanted so earnestly to leave to his son. Her eyes were narrowed to two slits, and she was seeing some inner vision which Amoret could not possibly guess.

"You know, honey, I'm goin' tell you something," she said slowly. "I ain't goin' to be with Myrtle and Joe very long. I got something . . . a kind of a big crowdin'-out pain inside of me that I ain't told 'em about. But I ain't afraid. I jest hope God is aimin' to let me stay with 'em long enough to help 'em git started again."

"You ought to tell them," Amoret said. "This trip is probably too hard for you."

"It ain't a thing," she said indignantly. "I got this big ole pain, but I'd have it jest the same whether I was lyin' in bed or settin' up there on that wagon. It's jest like as if a fox was chewin' up my insides." Her voice rose up then in a loud raucous cackle of applause. "That's the way to throw 'em, Joey-boy! Knock that there horseshoe of Myrtle's clean off the earth!"

"Now, Gramma, you're supposed to be cheerin' on my side today," Myrtle called back cheerfully.

"You don't need nobody on your side. You're the best horseshoe pitcher in Partinsville, and you know it."

Her voice dropped down again then to her passionate whisper, and she said gravely, "Only thing I ask God is that he'll jest take me off afore I'm any trouble to 'em."

She smiled with a sweetness that made Amoret turn away quickly so no shocking tears would show.

"God's been awful good to me, Miz Phelps. He give me such good children to work for, and now these nice little grand-young'uns of mine."

Amoret said, "I don't think I've ever known any people who seemed to enjoy each other the way you do."

"When people is as pore as we always ben, they don't have nothin' to enjoy exceptin' each other."

Amoret said shyly, "I notice you talk about God as if He was just somebody you know . . . just a part of your own family."

"That's right," Gramma said soothingly, the way she must have said it a thousand times to children's falterings. "Don't make no difference *what* happens to people if they got hold of God's shirt tail. That'll pull 'em through anything."

Amoret had a great desire, then, to tell her about Tobias. Why, that great man . . . and this great woman . . . they were related! They belonged to the same family. Their mother was America, and their father was God.

"I . . . I've got a Bible of my own," she said inadequately, for she knew there never would be time nor words to say what she really wanted to.

"Course you have, honey," Mrs. Martin said as if she were telling no revolutionary news. "And when you git your new home started, wherever it's going to be, make sure the Bible is the first thing you put in it. Make sure it's the first thing you put into anything you do. Then no matter what happens, you'll find you ain't never really left alone. You remember this here ole woman who told you that."

"I wanted to give *you* something," Amoret said. "And now, you've given me . . ."

"Go along with you," the old woman said in embarrassment. "I ain't got a thing to give nobody, specially somebody purty and rich like you. . . ."

The contest was over now and the little boy was rolling with joy because he and his mother had once again "licked pappy proper." They came over to the tree and would have sat down, but the little boy said, "Let's us all go up to the top of that hill and see what's comin'."

His father explained, rumpling his tousled little head affectionately, "Freddie's always wanting to go up on the top of some hill and see where we're goin' to be at purty soon."

"That's what keeps us gittin' along to where we're goin',"

Myrtle explained. "Lookin' ahead in your mind and then pushin' your feet along behind it. Keepin' on. That's what you gotta do to git anywheres."

"Gramma, you better set here. It's a right steep pull up that hill," Joe said to his mother. But Gramma struggled up on her feet.

"Not me," she said valiantly. "I'm the youngest of the lot of you, and you all know it, too."

The children ran across the bumpy field and up the hill which was a dark rim against the sky. When she reached the very foot of it Gramma had to give up.

"I'm goin' set right down here a spell," she said. "You-all git up there and call down and tell me what you see."

The rest of them scrambled up the bluff, and when they were at the top, a little breeze came up from the valley on the other side, and lifted their hair back from their faces.

"That there's tomorrow," Myrtle said in a soft voice. "There's your tomorrow, children. Look out at it, honey."

There was the outspread valley, wide as the sky above it. The thread of canal was stitched lazily along the foothills of the Alleghenies and the road was only a smudge drawn idly by a huge finger.

"It's peaceful lookin', ain't it?" said Joe. "That valley come right out of God's hip pocket, I reckon."

"My, this here's a lovely world, ain't it?" Myrtle said as gratefully as if it had just been created for their sakes.

If Stephen were only here! The words Amoret never could find, to tell him what his father had meant by this heritage of America, wouldn't be needed if he could have this moment as she was having it. Here it was in living fact for him to see and understand. These were people like Tobias himself, who were pushing the frontier wider and wider by faith and hard work as Tobias had pushed it nearly a century earlier. It could not be done only by machinery and invention, no matter how clever those were! It had to be pushed by hearts. By love . . . And even, perhaps . . . (although this was so strange a thought that she could not believe she was thinking it!) . . . and even, perhaps, by that Book itself which was half the heritage.

They heard voices now down the hill, and Joe's fists automatically curled up. He swung around angrily.

"I expect that there innkeeper thinks he owns this view!"

he said belligerently. "Probably comin' up to tell us to move on. Seems to me the country's gittin' purty crowded lately. . . ."

Across his words split the high-pitched screech of Gramma from below. "Miz Phelps . . . It's your husband . . . He's been awful worried about you-all. Right up there, Mister. . . . Cain't see 'em, but I know they're up there."

Now on the very heels of Amoret's wishing for him, Stephen was striding through the underbrush fifty yards away on the ridge. Amoret ran to him and flung herself into his arms.

"Oh, darling . . . I've wished you were here . . . I just this moment wished it terribly, and here you are! I've had such a wonderful time."

He disentangled himself angrily; it was the first time in their marriage that such a gesture had ever happened.

"What on earth are you doing?" he said. "The packet was ready to start. You were nowhere about . . ."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "I should have come into the tavern and told you . . . But I found these wonderful people, Stephen . . ."

"I think you're out of your mind," he said. "I've never seen you looking like this. Pin up your hair . . . look at your frock . . . what's come over you, anyway?"

"Oh, Stephen! . . . I didn't know there could be such people . . . they have nothing . . . and they're rich. . . ." She wrinkled her forehead, trying to remember where she had heard that before.

"Rich! My God, they're paupers!" Stephen said. "They're ignorant and dirty and shiftless . . . the scum of the earth . . . and you gallivanting around with them!"

She hardly heard him, for she was trying to locate where she had heard that thought before. Then it came to her. Of course! It was the codicil of Tobias' will! She said it aloud, hardly noticing that Stephen had bent down and was angrily stripping burrs and beggars' lice from her skirt.

"There is that maketh himself rich, and is poor," she quoted slowly. "There is that maketh himself poor and hath great riches.' That's it . . . that's what I've had this morning. Great riches. That's what your father wanted to give you, Stephen."

He got to his feet furiously, as if someone had struck him with a whip. His face was purple with rage and shame.

"What are you talking about!" he said in a whisper. "My father! Don't taunt me about that. I've suffered enough about my father. . . ."

She tried to put her arms around him, but he pulled away.

"Stephen, you don't understand."

"No, I don't. And I never shall. Don't keep . . ."

She looked over at the Martins, huddled dejectedly together against the sky. Even from this distance, she could see they realized what had happened. They looked hurt and snubbed, convicted of their rough clothes, their calloused hands, and their work-bent backs. The children were clinging bashfully to Myrtle's skirt, and Joe, no longer belligerent and bold, had a hangdog droop to his big frame. They wouldn't call out to her, they'd not risk their uncouth grammar in the presence of this angry man.

"Stephen . . . look at them . . . they're such wonderful people."

He threw them one angry glance, with no more interest than if they had been six sheep cringing timidly on the rim of the hill.

"How can I take you back to the boat looking like this . . . you look like one of those disgusting settlers' women!"

Then she said a thing that astonished her. "I am," she said with utter sobriety. "I am, Stephen. And I might never have known it, if all this . . ." She had a swift simple pictorial view of her Philadelphia destiny neatly wound as a spool of bright embroidery silk. But that would never be unwound and stitched into living. . . . A new life, sturdy as hemp, was going to be lived instead. And she would be a new woman, not made of embroidery silk now, but tough-spirited as rope. A pioneer woman. . . .

He paid no attention to what she had said. He took out his handkerchief and tried to brush some dust from her cheek. Then he held back a low branch from a bush, and curtly motioned for her to go down the hill, as if she were a disobedient pet. She went along a few steps, then she stopped and looked back up the hill. The Martins were standing in the same guilty little tableau, with the wide sky behind them, and the valley of tomorrow spread beyond. She waved to them, not caring what Stephen thought.

"Good-bye, Joe . . . Good-bye, Myrtle . . . thank you for everything . . . thank Gramma for . . ."

She couldn't say for what, and they would certainly never know. But *she* would know until the last day she lived.

They still didn't risk an answer. But after a few seconds, they timidly waved back to her, the children each daring to put up a grimy little hand.

Stephen strode ahead of her, so that he could hold back the undergrowth. His face was dark, and angrier than she ever had seen it. They didn't say anything more until they were down the hill, and halfway across the field.

"But Stephen . . . on the boat . . . you've been so friendly with those people . . ."

"There's no comparison," he said curtly. "I explained that to you, Amoret. It's been a game. It was the only way I could endure it."

"You mean . . . you haven't really *liked* them?"

"*Liked them?*" He turned and looked down at her in honest amazement. "How could I *like* them? They're filthy and ignorant. They disgust me. I put up with it, because it's only for a little while. And then . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders, helpless about explaining further. But now she understood. He had not loved them; he had not wanted to make the trip an adventure for them. He had only been play-acting to get himself through an unbearable necessity. He had been only dramatizing an impossible situation because he knew that in a week or so the curtain would fall upon it, and he would find again his own accustomed stage.

He was still striding ahead of her, but when they were nearly across the field, he turned and waited for her. His anger had passed now. He smoothed his stock and looked down at her. He put his arm around her and spoke gently.

"You see, Amoret, you've never met the world in any way. I shouldn't have been cross with you . . . you couldn't know."

She let two tears come into her eyes; there seemed no other reply. Let him think the tears were caused by his anger; let him think anything he pleased. . . .

"Don't feel badly, my darling," he said gently, and tipping up her face, he kissed her forgivingly. "We'll forget the whole thing now. By Gad, we're only part way through this terrible

trip, but we shall be in our own world some day, and we'll never think of any of this again. These dirty, vulgar peasants . . . I tell you, Amoret, it's been a shock to me."

She let her body relax a moment in his arms, but her mind, untouched and unwarmed, held itself aloof and would not even reach out a finger toward him.

This marriage between them . . . could it ever become a dwelling place for her? For what she really was, and what she must inescapably become, since something had waked within her?

Something had been born in her when she had listened to the will, and then had read the carved old face of Tobias' figurehead of Moses. It had struggled to its knees now. Someday it would want to stand upon its feet, and walk.

What would happen to her love when what was within her became strong enough to walk in its own direction? She felt desolate and frightened by her own cold bravery. Her husband put a protecting arm about her shoulders as they walked back to the inn. There was drollest irony in their position.

For he was protecting her from what was without. But the real danger to them lay within her.

PART II

*What made sleep flutter his wings and part?
Only the song of a secret bird.*

A Ballad of Dreamland, ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

CHAPTER ONE

About five o'clock in the morning, the canal came winding around the shoulder of a hill and found itself blocked on every side by mountains. The pocket looked like a trap, and there seemed no possible escape. Already caught in the trap was the quaint wooden village of Hollidaysburg, solid and toylike and fast asleep. You could almost imagine the village had been blown into the notch by the wind, which could carry it no farther.

Nobody had much to say because everyone was grimly apprehensive about this next thirty-six miles. The travelers had been secretly worrying about this portage railroad journey, even though they told each other it was perfectly safe. Now they were in the very presence of it, and there was no escaping.

The ridge rose almost fifteen hundred feet above the village, as unavoidable as fate. In the cold morning mists the passengers could count the five separate inclined planes brutally indicated against the mountain, each drawn as straight as a line which a giant might inscribe with a pencil. Yet, when once the flight was begun . . . for you could not really call anything so ethereal a "passage" . . . there was no time to be frightened. Amoret was completely reassured by one look at the huge hawser nine inches in circumference which pulled the cars up by means of stationary engines at the top of each plane. Stephen said the Alleghany Portage Railway Company had spent nearly three thousand dollars on ropes alone.

When the passengers were safely seated in the three cars (with a safety-car left empty at the end, to take the bump if an accident occurred) the women gripped the sides of the seats so desperately that their little fingernails were blue. Then the engine began its abdominal tugging and chugging, and you could feel an answering vibration in your own abdomen. Slowly the cars began rising, while a matching trio at the top of the plane descended, their weights balancing each other. Their motion was a kind of monstrous minuet, as they

drew nearer together with dignified stateliness, slow and ponderous and horribly dramatic.

Through the first rise, nobody dreamed of glancing out at the passing scenery; every eye was fixed straight ahead, glued to the rope on which all their existences depended. The car rose three hundred feet in less than a mile; it took your breath away to realize what was happening to you.

When Amoret dared steal a glance outside the car window, there were the topmost branches of the trees dropping from under her. Treetops and treetops dropping into an endless well. It was the most uncanny sensation, as if she were flying, lifted from the earth by great impossible wings. Then she looked out even farther . . . beyond the tops of the retreating trees . . . and below were settlers' houses, raw and new, set in the clearings of the forest. There were even animated little dots around those houses which must have been people waving madly at the brigade of cars.

You could see many such cleared places in the woods, where a man . . . a man like Joe Martin, probably . . . was taming the ancient wilderness to make a home-place. Blue smoke rose up from the chimneys and you knew that inside the house, mush and turnip greens were being "cooked with gratitude and eaten with grace." Amoret felt today as if she never again could look at the outside of a house without loving what lived within.

When they approached the top of the first plane and it seemed as if they were going to crash into the panting little iron monster which had pulled them up, they stopped, and got into another car to be dragged a couple of miles across a relatively level spot to the next great scale. Stephen was much moved by the sight of this wonderful engineering.

"Machinery is never again going to be afraid of a mountain," he said. "There's nothing that a man and his brains can't conquer."

The pull up the whole five flights took about four hours, for it was, in truth, about twenty-five miles. When you reached the top it was as if you were on the very doorstep of heaven. Two rival inns were there, and there was such exhilaration and delight in the air that indeed it required two to accommodate the celebrating. Those who had been the most frightened at the bottom of the mountain were the most

liberated and exuberant now. Everyone ate a hearty breakfast, and drank toasts and enjoyed himself for an hour before the ten-mile descent to Johnstown began.

With such a wonderful thing that men had made, Nature herself gave a little show one could never forget. In a cleared place on the very top of the ridge were two springs that bubbled up from the mountain. Each formed a limpid small pool, as if it were thus making up its mind, and then one became a stream that flowed to the east, and the other gushed joyously toward the west. A contradiction before your very eyes. Every traveler who attained this height, and saw the Allegheny divide with his own eyes, drank solemnly from each stream so that later he could boast about it. The Sparkes, unexpectedly poetic in spite of all their ribaldry, had brought along little glass bottles, which they filled with water from both springs to show to any incredulous stay-at-homes they might meet through the years to come.

When Amoret bent down and put her lips to the west-flowing little stream, it was more than a simple drinking; it was a kiss and almost a betrothal. But Stephen would not drink of it. He would not even look at the crude busy spring hurrying down the steeper hillside toward the west.

"I'll have enough of that later," he said sullenly to himself. "I'll wait and see whether or not I want to make a friend of western water."

Then, when everyone else had boarded the cars for the plunge down to Johnstown and the last lap of the canal, he went alone over to the east-looking stream and touched his finger nostalgically to its bosom. He came back and got into the car silently; nobody had seen what he had done except Amoret, and she loved him so much at that moment she thought her heart would break with pity for him.

(2)

Now they were really faced toward the West; for they had passed the high Alleghenies which were surely the rim of the world, and had committed themselves irretrievably to whatever lay beyond.

She felt as if that little stream which had chosen one course and rejected the other, had somehow mystically

passed into her very veins; they, too, would be pounding westward now, and nothing would turn her back.

She had a wild happy excitement in her, as if she knew some secret which only the years themselves would gradually divulge. As if she had a secret lover, whose name was the very name of this land whose body she was exploring with her heart. She was thirsty for knowledge about him, as a woman wants to hear all there is to know about a man with whom she has fallen in love. She wanted to talk about him with any stranger, as a woman is willing to talk with delicious, deceptive casualness about her lover with anyone who will listen. And here, held to her bosom, was a whole packet of papers about him. She could barely wait until she was in some quiet place so she could open that bundle and read what Tobias had written. He had loved this country as Amoret was beginning to. . . . Even when he had stood in the midst of his great fortune, ready to divide it among his children, the first treasure he mentioned was America. Even when he had businesses and estates and banks to leave them, the first of the riches on his list had been this country of theirs. He did not know then that it would be the only one of his bequests which would survive catastrophe.

Well, he *had* given it to his children, and if Stephen would not accept it, she would take it for both of them. She would take it into her blood and her days, and keep it alive in them so that the gift could endure for all of them, the past and the future.

But now she must begin learning what she could about it: why it was built, of what hopes and dreams and passion; why men had cared enough to choose it, and having chosen, to suffer hardship and death that the dream might come true.

After the trip across the portage railroad came three more crowded, tedious days on the canal to Pittsburgh, and through these Amoret lived rapt in her own thoughts. There was no privacy here, but she knew that when they finally reached the wonderful Ohio River steamboat, which was luxury travel indeed, she would begin reading what Tobias had written.

Stephen enjoyed the steamboat trip; the canal boats he had endured, but the steamboat had a semblance of comfort and an atmosphere of adventure which was exhilarating to him. They passed flatboats many times a day, with a man or a boy

at the sweep oar, patiently steering the unwieldy barge into the swiftest currents. They were little more than animal pens, these flatboats; they looked really as if a flood had invaded a farmyard and washed a cowpen out into the stream. But the families on them were healthy, ruddy emigrants with rude belongings around them, plows and cattle and furniture, a rocking chair with an old woman sitting in the very middle of a pigpen; a child's cradle dangerously close to a cow. But they all seemed unaware of how pathetic they were, and they seemed not to rebel against their destiny so plainly written on their bodies in wrinkles and work.

Stephen usually waved and called out to these emigrants some word of camaraderie.

"Mighty fine cow you have there, sir."

"I'd trade it for that fine elegant stovepipe you're wearin', mister," the old farmer shouted back.

"It's a deal," Stephen said jovially. "I'll throw you the hat and you throw me the cow."

The whole boat swarmed to the lee side to watch him playfully take off his hat and skim it across the water. It missed the flatboat by fifteen yards, but without a second's hesitating, the farmer leaped over the side of his boat, swam out into the river and rescued it.

"If I was as good a man as you, I'd throw you the cow," he shouted when he'd clambered back on his boat. "But I ain't. Not by long shot, I ain't."

"Well, don't forget you owe it to me," Stephen said, laughing with delight. "I'll expect you to take good care of her for me."

The very first morning on the Ohio, Amoret found a secluded place on the steamboat and opened the package. Before they had left Philadelphia she had thought that in all decency she must wait until Stephen and she opened the journal together. But now she was far past that. It was the first time she had made such a decision of her own. It welled up from such a depth within her that she did not even realize that it was a Declaration of Independence in her private history, a fierce American moment in the establishing of a new country within herself.

The journal was not as large as she had expected it would be, for though there were many loose papers tucked into it . . . documents and birth certificates, letters, a bill of sale for

one of Tobias' ships, and even love letters and a recipe . . . the little book itself had only a few closely written pages. It was probably his hope that some day this book would be published, a simple incomplete autobiography. Obviously it had not been written gradually through the years, but from some quiet, shaded clearing in his maturity the story looked back upon his life.

She was trembling with emotion as she read the first words in a whisper to herself.

"All my life I have carried on a quarrel with God." This was so utterly the reverse of what Amoret had expected to find that she closed the book guiltily. This couldn't be what he had intended to leave; there was some mistake.

If Tobias were going to prove to them that a man *could* quarrel successfully with God, when Amoret herself had just begun to glimpse what it might mean to touch one of His fingers in the darkness . . . she was not going to read the journal. Stephen did not care what happened to it. She would throw it into the Ohio. She would keep the good part of his legacy, the Book. She would destroy the little package of papers, and never think of them again.

Then, in fairness to the old man she loved, she opened the journal again, and went on reading breathlessly.

"To begin with, my father was a rich man. He should have been on the side of the well-to-do. But he insisted on being on the side of God. That made me ridiculous with my school-mates."

She was drenched with relief. She went on reading eagerly, and as she read, there formed in her mind the picture of a sunny dining room in Tobias' father's old Philadelphia house in the year 1770. A battered, bruised little boy of nine is standing before his father, who is scowling at him.

"So . . . you had a brawl in the common streets! My son acting like an ignoramus!"

The little boy is gruff about it. "That was what Richard Laird called me, sir," he says. "That was why I had to fight him."

"He called you an ignoramus?"

"No, sir. He called me common. Because of you, sir. He said you want the paupers to have as much say in the government as his father has."

The man looks thoughtful; the anger clears from his face.

"So that's it." Then he sits down and stands the little boy in front of him so that they can meet eye to eye, and not as adult and child.

"Do you know why these colonies were formed, Tobias?" he asks gently.

"So we could have a good place to live," the little Tobias says sullenly.

"Not just *us*. All people of good will," the elder Phelps says sternly. "A place to worship God. I have told you that, many times."

The little boy scuffs his toe into the carpet. He wishes they didn't always have to be talking about God in his family.

His father continues, "You cannot worship God without loving man. You cannot love man without wanting all men to be free. We will never have the free fine world we mean to build on this continent unless we do it this way."

The little boy swallows all this, and then he blurts out, "Richard Laird says my grandfather was a bond servant, sir. That's not true, is it?"

The father looks at his small son yearningly, desiring to give him only as much of the truth as he can understand.

"My father believed in this country so deeply that he was willing to sell himself. That was all he had to sell. That's how he earned his passage to America."

The child feels the pride in his father's voice, but it only puzzles him. Then his father speaks very humbly.

"God sifted a whole nation, son, to send choice seed to this wilderness. God's seeds are never money or power. God's only seeds are men."

The child has stood as much as he can. "God!" he cries out angrily and irreverently. "You're always talking about God . . ." He is close to tears now.

But that doesn't save him. His father raises his hand to strike him for his blasphemy. Then the hand drops, and he controls himself.

"You cannot talk about our colonies without talking about God," he says, much moved.

He puts his hand gently on the boy's shoulder, and the child, eager to be forgiven and taken back into favor, leans against him affectionately.

"This land is different from all other countries on earth, son. Because here men chose God instead of comfort."

The little boy bursts out crying now. "I don't choose God, I just wish we didn't have to talk about Him. My friends laugh at you, sir. . . ."

Amoret lifted her face from the book. She understood that little boy as if he had been born to her. She knew the father as if she had long looked up into his face, and had drawn from it inner strength and confirmation.

She went back to reading Tobias' words then.

"It was always like that. My father believed in the Divine destiny of our land. He believed that God would build on America because America had built on God. . . ."

Quick footsteps were coming toward her. She flattened herself against the little bench on which she was sitting by the rail, absurdly hoping she might not be noticed. Please . . . not now, she cried impatiently to herself . . . go away, whoever you are. She let her eye slip from the page to the deck, for the footsteps had stopped beside her. There, planted wide apart, were Stephen's handsome black boots, shined and polished now by the valet man-servant attached to this floating palace.

"What are you doing up here, anyway?" he said amusedly. "You've had your nose in that little book for the last hour. Come along and walk with me. Thank God, we've a place to stretch our legs at last. I'd have been a hunchback in another week. . . ."

"Oh, Stephen . . . I've been reading. . . ."

Then he recognized what it was and his face flushed angrily.

"Amoret, I asked you," he said. "*Please.*"

She was up beside him, holding the book out to him.

"But, darling, it is so much more wonderful than you have any idea."

"You act like a woman in love," he said, and he laughed unsteadily. This was no moment to be quarreling over that hateful nonsense his father had left. This was a time for . . . After all, there had been a great many days when the two of them had had to be on constant, circumspect behavior among the press of passengers.

"I am in love," she said softly. She put up her hands and touched him impulsively.

"Amoret . . . this has been a ghastly journey, hasn't it?" he said huskily. "And it will be another whole week before we

can be respectably alone again. Traveling is certainly not good for lovers."

She could have let it rest at that, just one more of those misinterpretations which so pleased her husband; it could be just one more time when her ardor had treacherously misrepresented her. Then, for the first time, her own honesty seemed equally as important as her husband's approval.

"I am in love with you, Stephen," she said most seriously. "And I'm always going to be in love with you."

"You'd better be," he said. "A lifetime won't be long enough, for all the love I have in me to give you."

"But something else has happened to me," she said, her voice almost breaking with feeling. "I'm in love with something else now."

She turned from him, trying to steady herself so she could tell him calmly. She looked over the rail of the steamboat, down at the white, churned water, and beyond at the wooded shore with its few huddling houses and the people shading their eyes to see the great event of the *Saint Louis Belle* passing.

"I'm in love with a whole new country," she said in a whisper to herself. She lifted her face to the air as if she would receive a kiss. Stephen watched her with bewilderment and interest. It was maddening to him to see that there was even the tiniest corner of her that he did not understand, that he did not indeed form within her.

She turned from the rail then, and seeing his face clenched in emotion, she took a step toward him across the deck. She put her arms around him with an excitement and ardor that he had seldom seen in her.

"Stephen," she said, "I want a child."

He was so shocked and surprised by her words that he drew back quickly from her. Then pleasure flooded his whole body, and he bent his face upon her, and took her impulsively in his arms, forgetting they were on the public deck of a steamboat, where any yokel might see them.

"You never said such a thing as that," he said. "You're such a child yourself . . . but you're becoming a woman, Amoret. What a magnificent woman you're becoming! . . . When you grow up, when you're not afraid of what I can make you feel . . . wild, wonderful things . . . when you're not afraid of being lost in it, the way a pebble is lost in

the sea and then comes back upon the shore, safe and quiet, while the tide goes out again. . . . The things I can make you feel, when you'll let me. . . ."

"I want a child to help me inherit this earth," she said.

That surprised him almost as much as the first remark. What did she mean by that? When a woman wanted a child it was only because of some further, unspeakable passion she felt for her husband. It was her silent, woman's way of crying out a word that could be spoken only by flesh itself. What other kind of wanting could there be in a woman?

But his blood was clamoring too loudly for his mind to stand by analyzing coldly.

"You shall have a child," he said.

For one more moment he permitted himself to be lost in the mad delight of holding her against his very veins so that they strummed with that music which only she could play upon him, as she played upon her harp. Then he put her carefully from him, and straightened his stock and brushed back his dark hair under his jaunty hat. He took a few steps away from her and looked at her beseechingly, asking her with his eyes to help him get the temperature of this conversation down to a more conventional degree. She had watched him recover from passion before when it was not seemly, and she understood that it would be necessary for him to make a little joke. Yes, there it came.

"We'll have lots of children, my darling. Six like you and six like me. But not until we have ample servants to bring them up decently. We want no brood of hoodlums around us, you know. I want children who are masterpieces of good breeding and manners . . . none of those smirking ciphers that Horace begot . . . nor the skimpy offspring left over from Eliza."

But Amoret was not talking about any brood; she was talking about only one child, one immediate child.

"I can bring him up decently, whether we have any servants or not," she said.

She searched his face, begging him to understand her, begging him not to ravel into nothing this brave unwomanly ardor, which had broken from her in the relief of words. It was almost the first time in her life that some deep feeling in her had been able to say through her tongue what was shouting behind her shyness. She could not bear to have

Stephen dwarf it to a little joke between them. Even a little love-making joke, his favorite kind.

"I have things to give our child which don't depend on any servant," she said in a hushed voice. "Once I wouldn't have had, Stephen. Once I wouldn't have known anything to give our child . . . anything that belonged to me, I mean . . . anything he couldn't get from somebody else. . . . But *now* I know. . . ."

He was pretending this earth-breaking conversation between them was happening in their own sunny sitting room in Philadelphia, where it was proper for a husband to consider his wife a charming, beautiful child. A nice woman wanted to be so considered, to be laughed at with affection and indulgence. . . .

"What things are these you know, my curly-headed darling?" he said happily, leaning over and pulling one of her curls.

"The things your father left us, Stephen," she said boldly.

She could have said nothing which would have destroyed his mood so utterly. Her words stung him into instant anger. He turned violently away from her; his face sharpened, and a white line quivered beside his mouth.

"Don't let me hear you mention that again," he said bitterly. "My father tried to make a fool of me. . . . But I'll show him . . . and you . . . and everybody . . . that I don't need any advice from him. Nor any money from him, either. I'll make my own way."

"Stephen, you've got to listen."

"Not to him and not to you," he said like a stubborn, furious boy. "Why should I listen to him? What did his advice add up to? Nothing but words, after all. That's the test, isn't it . . . what did he achieve finally? Words . . . fine words."

"And a fine life," Amoret said.

"Well, I'll make my own life. And I'll think up my own words."

"Stephen, he loved you so much. . . ."

"I don't blame him for being a failure," he said, trying to be calmer now. His face was distorted with that love of his father which was the reason behind all his anger. "Any man can fail. That's not what I blame him for. You ought to know that, Amoret. But he had no right to try to tell me how to

live. If his words don't add up to success, he has no right to saddle me with them. . . ."

He turned then, and walked away from her. He could not shout at her, and the only way he could prevent it was to leave her, and walk off his anger somewhere among strangers.

(3)

They had a shock when they reached Saint Louis. Stephen had confidently expected to meet his friend Stanton Purvis there, but they found at the Planter's House that he had left several weeks before. Indeed, the manager showed Stephen some of his own letters, addressed in his own assured hand, which were being held for Mr. Purvis pending his return. Naturally, since he had not got the letters, Stant didn't know that Stephen was expecting that he would meet them here, and escort them to Mount Olympus.

"I expect to hear from him any day now," the manager said, seeing how dashed Stephen was. "He's a very nice gentleman, Mr. Purvis is."

Saint Louis itself was quite a disappointment. They had expected a city somewhat like Philadelphia, in a small way. After all, there were sixteen thousand people here, and you might suppose that they would have built something creditable. Except for the narrow, crooked streets of the French quarter, it was all rather rural . . . it seemed, in fact, about what you might have met in Pennsylvania fifty years before. The bank, for instance, where Stephen went to make further inquiries, looked like a country store compared with the fine marble structure of the Girard Bank, or Tobias' own bank building. The man who was supposed to be the President was a harassed little farmer, bashful in the presence of Stephen's assurance.

"I'm Stephen Phelps. I own quite a bit of property in Mount Olympus," he said, by way of introduction. The farmer brightened up and looked at him respectfully.

"Yes, sir," he said, and his eye was almost lascivious in its hope that Stephen was going to bring a big deposit of Eastern funds into this place. "Mount Olympus? Is that in New York state? I'm sorry, sir, but I don't know much about the East of late years."

"I mean Mount Olympus, Illinois," Stephen said with dignified tolerance of such bald ignorance. He spread out his deeds, and the map of Mount Olympus, and the farmer bent over and squinted bashfully at it. He looked a long, long time, and red crept up the back of his bent-over neck. Then he straightened up and looked at Stephen, but now his eye was kind and no longer timid.

"I don't just know where that place is," he said. "Miles is longer out here, and we don't know as much about our neighbors as you people do back East."

"I see," Stephen said. "Well, never mind, my good man. I know how to reach it all right. I board the stage to Springfield, and then I go about twenty miles further."

"Good luck to you, son," the banker said. "Did you say your name was Phelps? You wouldn't be related to Tobias Phelps, the banker, would you? I've heerd my father tell about him. A fine man. . . ."

It was incredibly good to hear such words. This couldn't be such a mudhole after all, when you got to know it. . . .

The most violent part of the whole journey, from the point of view of your shaken-up liver, was the one-hundred-and-sixteen-mile stagecoach drive that followed, during the next two days. James' Travelers' Companion, the gazetteer which had listed the route from town to town between Saint Louis and Springfield, gave no hint of what an experience it was to be.

The trip began innocently enough, with the big red-painted barn of a coach with all its horses being driven on to the Mississippi ferry, and then slowly being drawn across the river. But as soon as the other shore was reached, with the nine passengers packed into the airless, dusty cage, so close together that you couldn't even put up your hand to brush away a fly, you knew you were in for a grueling ordeal. It soon became clear that the passengers were going to be exposed to a kind of land-sickness more violent than any seasickness ever known, for the coach jiggled and jostled and swung in three directions at once, a forward lunge and plunge, and a side-to-side roll, both combined with an up-and-down jouncing and jarring which made nausea inevitable.

Stephen, with some idea of carrying on a conversation with the driver, had elected to ride on the box. But there was no

chance to talk. Hanging onto the low iron wicket on his side of the seat so that he wouldn't be tossed off like an autumn leaf into the mud of the bottom lands, took all his strength and attention. What was inaccurately called the road seemed mere notches cut in the shifting muck, through which the horses sprawled and floundered, sometimes with the very splash-board scraping against their backs.

The driver, a hook-nosed brigand in a dilapidated straw hat with a red handkerchief tied under his chin to hold it on, had little to say besides expostulations and oaths. His feet and his bottom were planted like three anchors, but even so, he lurched and lunged and leaped into the air, cursing and muttering and yanking on the reins. It appeared several times that he would throw up the whole deal and let the horses just drive themselves. Throughout all this shaking up, he managed to keep champing on a fist-sized cud of tobacco, and this, too, was one of the hazards which Stephen had to dodge.

When they came to a relatively quiet spot between Edwardsville and Paddock's Grove, Stephen tried to find out what he could from this man who must have known the countryside better than most people.

"I wonder if you're acquainted with the town I am moving to?" he said in his friendly fashion.

"Nope," said the driver, "I ain't acquainted with nothin'."

"Ever heard of Mount Olympus?" he tried again.

"Nope," he said, "I ain't never heard of nothin'. No more than I can help hearing of, anyway."

At Bunker Hill the driver and the horses left to be replaced by a fresh group. The new man who climbed up on the box looked a little more friendly, so Stephen tried again.

"No," the driver said slowly, "I don't get to see much. Nothin' except the rumps of these here horses, rarin' up in front of my face ten hours a day."

At Auburn, which was only seventeen miles from Springfield, Stephen got into conversation with the most loquacious of the passengers from within the coach, a tall dirty-faced man with a thatch of blond hair sticking out from under a wormy-looking wool cap.

"You seem to know a lot about this country," Stephen said, unlocking the gate with a compliment as he so often did.

"Yep," the stranger said, "ain't nobody knows more about

this country than me. Lessen' it's God. Him and me kind of made it between us, you might say."

"Then you probably know about Mount Olympus. The town I'm moving to," Stephen said eagerly.

"Mount Olympus," he said, scratching his head. "Can't say as I've ever *seen* it."

The neighbor let his impudent black eye run up and down Stephen's good clothes like a cockroach.

"But I did kind of hear of it," he said at last. "It's one of them stake towns."

"Stake town?" Stephen asked with interest. "What kind of town is that?"

"Well, I'll tell you," the man said, and he spat twice with great thoroughness. "You've heard the expression, 'He's got a stake in it,' meaning he's kind of got a financial interest in something? Ever heard that?"

"Yes, of course."

"And you've heard the expression, 'He's stakin' his hopes on it.' You know that one too, don't you?"

"Yes, I believe I do," Stephen said patiently.

"Well, these stake towns is towns made out of people's interests and their hopes. You know what I mean?"

Stephen nodded, not wanting to interrupt any of this original exposition.

"Now the rest of us round here, we build our towns out of sweat and get. *You* might say our towns is kind of crude. But you put plenty of sweat into a thing, and you'll *get* somethin'. Sweat and get . . . that'll hold a thing together."

"I see," Stephen said, not seeing at all.

The wormy orator was warming to his subject, and his eye glittered with pleasure.

"But a stake town is somethin' quite different. A town made out of hope and money . . . that's apt to be a right purty sight. A kind of a dream town, somethin' just common people wouldn't think of. You can't exactly say *what* kind of a town that might be. As highfalutin as a body's hopes, and as great-big as a man's interest, when he can just set down and work up interest in a thing without gettin' his hands dirty or anything."

A kind of pleased wheezing began way down under the bottom button of his coat, and came up in waves until it burst out of his face in ripples of sound. He seemed enor-

mously pleased with himself; he cast around his eye, obviously wishing he had a bigger audience.

Stephen thought, "I'll never understand these people. They're full of mysterious strange confusion. I would have said this fellow has been expounding some kind of simple philosophy rather than humor. Yet here he is laughing as if there were some wonderful joke."

"Yep," he was saying. "That's the way I describe a stake town. Somethin' reared up out of money, full of hopes and ambitions and all kind of stuff like that."

"Well, all kind of stuff like that built some mighty fine cities in the East," Stephen said, trying his best to enter into this comradeship on terms of equality.

"That they did, mister," his neighbor conceded. "That they did. But the West ain't the East and it never will be. You'll see what I mean later. No mistake about that, mister."

The country through which they were lunging and plunging was dismal to see. It rolled like a dry ocean, if such a thing could be imagined. There were undulations but no hills as far as the eye could see. No hills and few trees, only a vague hope of trees occasionally on the horizon, or a sketched line of woods where a muddy stream meandered through the prairie. The houses that they passed were forlorn and far apart, as if all of them had been built by dissipated people who were finished with the human race, and wanted no more dealings with it.

The villages were gaunt and small and rather terrifying in their arrogant ugliness. Bad as the naked country looked, Stephen was relieved every time the stagecoach roared on again after a stop in a village, and he could be free of the staring, pointing noisy townspeople. Land he understood . . . he knew how to make friends with land. . . .

No land is friendly until men have tamed it, he thought reasonably to himself. Men must teach the land to eat out of their hands, so that they can eat out of its hand. Land is a wild surly beast, until you have put the harness of civilization upon it. Then, when you understand each other, you can ride it as you would a bridled horse.

This land, however, had the look of a different kind of animal. Here was land with a sullen, massive, buffalo look. It had its head down and was charging at you angrily; its roll-

ing might have been the massed backs of a hostile herd of monster buffalos.

A vision of his own pleasant land rose up in him. The gentle acres, rising and falling like melody for the heart itself to sing. The gracious sweep of the poplar screen, ninety-six poplars spaced along the curve of the drive . . . a corps de ballet it had seemed to him when he had ridden along the drive between them. The lasting loveliness of land that he had known since he was a child . . . and now this mockery of mud. He felt a surge of homesickness more terrible than he ever had dreamed could be. It was as if the very earth were twitting him in some irreverent practical joke.

He was not riding on the box now. At the last stagestand they had passed, he had crept inside the coach, because the sight of the land depressed him. He was huddled in a corner of the demented coach, one leg unbearably cramped where he had crossed his knee and now had no room to uncross it. Amoret slipped her hand under his arm probably for her own reassurance. But it comforted him so much that he felt weak tears behind his eyelids. Through the swirling yellowish dust-filled air of this vile-smelling coach (it smelled as if they must have lately hauled mules in it) her bright sweet eyes met his and she smiled. She even winked at him as if to say, "All this is just fantastic . . . it has nothing permanent to do with us. . . ."

Springfield was the end of this run, and it would have been logical to spend the night here at the little tavern, and then start to Mount Olympus in the morning, bathed and fresh and composed. But there was such savage suspense in knowing that they were only twenty miles away from their destination that Stephen felt he must end it tonight.

"We'll go on, unless you are simply too exhausted," he said to Amoret.

Her dusty little face was almost tremulous with tiredness but she said, "Exhausted? What would I be tired about? I've done nothing but ride all day." Gad, she was a game little thing, he thought gratefully. A whimpering woman would have been just one trial more than he could have endured.

"All right then," he said, letting his appreciation show in his approving eyes. "We know there is a hotel at Mount Olympus, and we might as well get this whole ghastly trip finished

and behind us. Tomorrow we'll begin forgetting it, and living our new life."

She squeezed his hand, and then, as a rather new mutation in their relationship, she patted it as if she were stronger than he.

The last twenty miles took four hours. The tall wormy-looking traveler had got off at Springfield, but he had told an acquaintance about Stephen. This man came over and introduced himself to Stephen.

"Mighty glad to see you, stranger," he said with a scowl which belied his words. "My name's Nat Burden, and I'm proud to make you welcome."

He thrust out a stained gnarled hand, and Stephen, after a second's hesitation, shook it genially.

"Hear you're aimin' to live in Mount Olympus," this brawny moose of a man said brightly, when they were all in the next coach and ready to start.

"Indeed, I am," Stephen said, quite pleased. "You know the town?"

"Shore I know it. Watched it being built."

"Is that so?" A fountain of relief sprang up in him. What had he been fearing, way down deep in himself where he would not admit it? News just didn't travel in this backwoods; that was all it had meant. But now that they were drawing near the place. . . .

"Certain'y do envy you, my friend," the big moose said in a loud voice that invited all the coach to participate in the conversation. "Ain't many of us out here found a city all waitin' for us when we come. We had to dig our lives right up out of the mud. But a man like you, nice clothes and all that . . . excuse me for mentionin' 'em, sir. . . ."

"It's a fine place, is it?"

"Fine ain't the word," the man cried heartily. "Like they said, it's a place fitten fer the gods to live in."

The others in the coach joined in. Their descriptions of Mount Olympus were certainly reassuring. One old woman, shifting her pipe to the other side of her mouth so her words could dribble out better, said: "Everytime I brek my back over the washtub, I git to wishin' I was one of them there goddesses, so I could live that-a-way."

They all expressed themselves, and the coach rocked with racket and wit. They all got to laying out the way they'd live

if they just had a chance at Mount Olympus. Stephen, tired and grimy as he was, felt better than he had felt for days.

"Tell you what," he said magnanimously, "when we get ourselves settled, you people better come over and visit us."

"We'll do that," they said, their eyes sparkling. "We'll certainly do that, mister."

Now it was late afternoon, with the sun almost on the horizon, a flat red copper penny slipping into the penny bank of darkness. Above the conversation, Stephen strained his eyes, but there was no lovely outline of city anywhere over the vast purple rolling of the land. He and Amoret gazed into every approaching angle of the distance, and there were no grouped towers and shafts and cubes, which might have meant a city. There was only purple emptiness, and sometimes the huddled misery of a lonely cabin, with a rickrack of fence basted in long ragged stitches around it.

"You can't see it yet," the talkative stranger, Nat Burden, said. "But you jest keep on lookin', mister."

"Whyn't you hesh your mouth?" said a dour little woman who had not spoken before. Everyone in the coach now had slipped into quietness, as if the gloomy twilight outside had got into them. Their faces, a few minutes ago so round and merry, were now weary and pinched and drained. They peered out of the windows and said nothing. The only noise was the slopping of the wheels, and the thunder and rumble of the coach.

Stephen's hands were like ice inside his gentleman's gloves. He couldn't stand much more of this suspense. . . . Suddenly the coach lumbered to a lurching stop; all the bodies within leaped forward and then rocked back to a balance.

"I jest hope he ain't broke an axle," one querulous passenger whined. "Oncet I was in a stage that broke an axle."

The door was wrenched open then, and the driver said, "This here's Mount Olympus. Ain't that where you wanted to go, mister?"

He left the big door swinging open on its leather hinges, while he scrambled up on the step at the rear to drag down the Phelps' baggage from the boot.

In the quietness, Amoret could hear him muttering and fuming to himself, "I shore hate to drap this stuff in the mud. It don't look fitten for what'all is here." But his qualms were only momentary, for he dumped the whole collection reck-

lessly beside the deep ruts of the road. Stephen, trembling in every limb, climbed over the knees of the other passengers.

Nobody said anything. Even the noisiest were quiet now, even the ones who had whispered most maliciously about his too-good clothes and his elegant baggage. They had expected this would be a gleeful sight, this dandy being put down in the midst of nothing but mud. They had expected to roar with pleasure, salving their own hurts with his hurt. They had imagined how they would tell their neighbors about it on Saturday night, describing every last cruelty of it with satisfied glee. But it was no comfort to them after all. It was unbearably bleak; they felt anger tingling behind their eyelids and shame along their scalps. All their own private indignities, their defeats and frustrations came to life in them and choked them with self-pity.

This moment was one more hard bud blooming meanly on a family-tree of disappointments. Nothing had ever gone well. They had hung up their stockings on a thousand Christmas Eves, and there had been no toys in them, only shavings and kindling wood. They had been promised bread and had cracked their teeth on stone; they had been promised fish, and a serpent had smirked at them.

They had thought all this genealogy of disappointment would whet their appetites for seeing this fine stranger made a fool of, just as they had been made fools of, over and over. They had been licking their chops to guzzle down this moment, but now that it was here and they had bitten into it, it made them sick.

They could not even look into his face. Their eyes slid under their eyelids and they felt a guilty shame and a nameless rage against the mud and the hardship which this stranger didn't even begin to guess about. Mud and hardship . . . and the hardship was a kind of mud which soiled the very spirit of a man, unless he had in him something which few people have.

Homesickness stole over them for something they had never known, as if they were catching a glimpse of themselves once having been clean and free, who now were shackled to meanness. They huddled down in the coach, and let Stephen climb over them. They were indignant with each other, and angry with this earth, for it had made fools and slaves of them, after it had promised them so much. And now

here was another one stuck in it. What chance would *they* themselves ever have, when a man as smart as this one looked, had been fooled?

The old woman with the pipe put out her hand and touched Stephen's sleeve timidly.

"It ain't what it looks like, son," she said. "Don't jedge it too hard. Whensoever you kin put yourself *into* it . . ."

Stephen shook his head and tried to smile. When he was out of the coach, he took off his hat and fumbled for a word to give them. After all, this was all they had; this land belonged to these poor wretches. He had no right to make them even poorer by letting them see how vile it all was, how the very inside of him had crumbled at the sight of this emptiness. He tried to think of a word that would show them he wasn't blaming them for their mean little joke. But no word came, and he could only stand there before them, smitten to silence.

The driver himself lifted Amoret down into the mud.

"Well, g'bye, Miz Phelps . . . and Mr. Phelps, too," he said awkwardly. "Good luck to you both."

He climbed back up on the box, and shouted furiously at the horses, glad of a chance to snarl at something, and have a perfect right to snarl.

The stage ploughed on its way, throwing up clouts of mud from the wheels. There was a diminuendo in the clatter, and the coach dwindled and blurred in the gloom. The hand of night closed down on the scene, squeezing out lonely twitterings of frogs and crickets between the fingers of the silence.

Stephen looked completely crushed. Amoret herself could barely speak, but she had to find something to say. A woman could at least do that. They were nearly ankle deep in the mud; all around them in silver rims of reflection, the mud oozed into tiny rivulets. Handfuls of silvery coins seemed flung down everywhere, but they were only the myriad puddles, each minted of silver reflected from the sky.

The emptiness was marked out into streets and avenues with white-painted stakes. There were even names on the streets: "Apollo Avenue," "Appian Way," "Mercury Street." Some of the signs on which these optimistic names had been painted had slipped down into the mud at crazy angles. In the center of the wilderness, there was a large battered fence-like sign, with which the winter wind had had its way. One

corner of it had broken off in a gigantic dog's-ear. Its brave words were barely visible through the twilight. Against his will Stephen read them:

*Welcome to
Mt. Olympus, Illinois
Home of Culture and Corn
Lots for Sale*

He picked up his foot and looked helplessly at his handsome boot. He stood on one foot a moment, glancing around for firmer ground, then he set his foot hopelessly back in the muck.

"I've been a fool," he said. "You are married to a fool, Amoret."

"But the pictures . . . how could they draw such pictures?" she faltered with a trembling lip.

"My God! . . . Stant couldn't have known," Stephen said. "He wouldn't have let this happen to us, if he had known. . . ."

"There was a hotel," Amoret said. "And that little school-house on Minerva Avenue . . . and the theater. . . ."

"We were going to have a bath at the hotel," he said, trying with ghastly humor to smile. "If we want to have a bath, we'll have to build the hote' first."

Amoret was rallying as valiantly as possible. She was afraid to look in Stephen's face, for fear she might find something there that would be such shame to him that he would never forgive her for seeing it.

"Well . . . all cities must have looked this way once, darling." She said it with absurd lightness, an instinctive attempt to commit the forgery of feminine irresponsibility which would remind him that he was a clear-thinking man with a woman to take care of. She'd have to be light-hearted and silly . . . that might make him feel that he was the stronger one. She said the sentence again, and added to it a little ridiculous ruffle of laughter.

But while she was uttering this gallant imbecility, her eyes were realistically scanning the dismal site.

She said to herself, "Well, at last we are where we can't go on pretending. We have to face things now. Just the three of us." Then her mind asked itself in surprise . . . "The *three* of

us? Who are the three?" Slowly her eyes came back from the desolate stretch, and glanced down at the bundle she was holding under her cloak. She had carried it so constantly that she was scarcely aware of it. Yes, there were three of them . . . Stephen and herself and the heritage. The three of them would have to work together from here on; they would have to build together whatever kind of life they chose to live. The wind had loosened her hair under her flower-trimmed bonnet, and was fluttering her silken, mud-hemmed skirt behind her. But she stood tall, with her feet squarely planted. She looked at that moment, exactly like a pioneer woman facing the wilderness and mentally rolling up her sleeves.

Off to the left there was a hunchback cabin, which the stagecoach had passed. It looked from here like a dwarf bent over with a stomachache. There was smoke coming up from the chimney, so there must be someone there to take them in. That was how they would begin, by asking for help. Humbly.

CHAPTER TWO

Every afternoon from her cabin window Opal Larsen watched the lumbering black silhouette of the stagecoach crawl across the firmament of the plains like a burlesque of the sun itself creeping across the prairie of the sky. Today the stage stopped. She dropped what she was doing and called to the young'uns to come see. They all ran out of the cabin and shading their eyes against the level sun, they squinted across the soggy purple emptiness.

"Looks like that coach stopped," Mrs. Larsen said excitedly.

"Did, Ma."

"Well, then it's time we went over and heartened up them pore people, whoever they are," she said. "Maybe you young'uns better go while I red up the cabin."

The four children were already scrambling across the doorway; their arms and legs outflung in a crablike sprawl as they tried to run swiftly over the soft ground. Mrs. Larsen, peering against the sun at the tableau, watched the coach drive away, and clucked sympathetically. She had seen this happen before.

"Seems like people in the East who know how to read, believe whatever they read! Just too bad," she thought to herself mercifully. She looked around her bare cabin for some symbol of welcome with which she could break the fall of the bad news to these people who soon would come dejectedly into her presence. She went quickly to a big crude oak chest and pulling open the bottom drawer, took out a white apron. A crust of heavy crocheted lace was laid along the edge of it, and even in this moment of hurry, she stopped to admire it, as she tied it on. Then moistening her fingers she smoothed up the straggling feathers of hair around her face.

"I don't look like much, but I might as well look like as much as I can," she said to herself out loud. (Lands, she'd have died of lonesomeness if she hadn't had herself to talk to!)

"Likely they're used to things real nice where they come

from," she added. She got out fresh candles and stood them in the corn-cob holders Elk had made last Christmas. That little woman, whoever she was, would find out soon enough how dreary things was; might as well spend her first night in a room that looked as bright and cozy as possible.

She was mighty glad she had cooked the roast pork for supper tonight. Something certainly must have told her. She ran and looked out the door once more to see how the young'uns were getting along with the visitors. They were all straggling across the field, each making his own pace. Tom, her oldest boy, an eight-year-old, was dragging along a big square carpet sack and Emily had her share, while each of the two smaller children was humped over with some piece of dunnage. But even so they were not able to bring it all; she could see even from here a little huddle still standing beside the road.

"Land of Goshen!" she fumed, "they must be rich people." She didn't want them to be too rich; she wanted terribly to like them. Almost more than any other comfort, she needed some neighbors way out here by herself . . . some people she could love and help. Be too bad if they were real rich people so that they could do for themselves awhile, and then maybe pack up again and go home the way those people did who came out last Fall. Elk said they didn't need no neighbors out here, but a man didn't know about those things. A woman has got to have some other woman to talk to. She'd go crazy after a while just scoldin' at young'uns and trying to talk to her husband. Especially a man like Elk, who never had much to say anyway.

They were within a hundred yards of the house now, and Mrs. Larsen's heart was rocking excitedly like a gossip in a rocking chair. This was the best thing that had happened to her for a long, long time. You couldn't tell *what* nice thing was coming up over the hill of a day, she said to herself excitedly. Why, this morning when she got up she didn't have any idea . . . and here, before night come down . . .

Tom had dropped his bundle to run up to the cabin ahead of the others.

"Ma," he cried, "that there gentleman asked us if there was any hotel around here. What *is* a hotel?"

"Hush," his mother said, "hush your mouth now, and get back there and help with whatever it was you were totin'!"

She went to the door and stood there awkwardly, her coarse hands hidden under the apron, as if the crocheted lace must do the pleading for her in the first impression. Amoret arrived at the door with no free hand to reach out and touch the woman in greeting. But her eyes went out and did the touching, in gratitude for understanding received even before it was spoken.

"Mrs. Larsen . . . the children say your name is Larsen . . ." she faltered. "I don't know what we'd do, my husband and I, if you people weren't here."

The two women measured each other with a long look, and a silent pact was signed between them. Opal Larsen would have been glad to see any kind of woman . . . any kind at all. But Amoret was somebody she knew she was going to love.

"My land sakes!" she said almost crossly, "I don't know what *any* of us would do if there wasn't always somebody else around! Don't you know that, child?" Her eyes kindled with a sweetness so unexpected it almost brought tears to Amoret. "Why, when my man and me got here nine years ago, somebody had to help *us*. Least we can do is help other people that come. You'll be doin' the same one of these days."

She took the small grip and set it down gently, and looked back over her shoulder into the young face. "I always make believe like it was me needin' the help," she said simply.

Amoret stepped into the cabin, and realized it all in one swift look. With an instinctive idea of establishing her acceptance of this situation in some visible gesture, she took off her bonnet and laid it on the bundle of books she was carrying. Then, bareheaded, as if she already lived in this place, she went to the door to greet her husband. She herself had stepped across the line into this new life, and she wanted to be there, ready to draw him across with her own reassuring hand.

"Come in, Mr. Phelps," she said. "We've found friends. Mrs. Larsen, this is my husband."

At the sight of Stephen a bashfulness she had not known with Amoret paralyzed Mrs. Larsen. She wanted to say as much to him as she had to the girl, but this man was a little too grand for any words she could lay her tongue on.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," she mumbled miserably. Stephen, equally miserable, put down his heavy bag and

bowed stiffly at her. Although he did not mean it so, there was sarcasm in the very courtesy of the bow. The children were trooping into the room behind him, and both women, knowing the heaviness of import in this first moment, concentrated on them to help everyone get through it.

"What fine helpers your children are!" Amoret cried with false vivacity.

"Set them things down careful now, you young'uns," Mrs. Larsen said in a scolding, affectionate voice. "There might be somethin' in there to break. I know when we come out from Kentucky, mama give me some of her nicest China teacups, and didn't Elk break one of 'em before we even got 'em unpacked! I set right down and cried. Course I was younger then," she added apologetically. Nine years' dreary synopsis lay in that simple explanation.

"I reckon nothin' couldn't make me cry now," she added with spirit. "Unless it was somethin' happened to Elk or the young'uns. After you seen all the things I seen happen . . . well, you jest get cried out, I guess. . . ." Then in horror, she realized that what she was saying was hardly reassuring, so she bustled around busily.

"Now you people make yourselves at home," she said. "We ain't got much, but everything we got here you're welcome to."

Small as the room had been when Amoret first looked at it, it became even smaller when Stephen stood in the center glancing around awkwardly, trying his best to fit in and yet by very contrast making the whole thing more miserable and poor and sordid than it would have been without him. She took his hat out of his hand and laid it beside hers, smiling at him as she did so. Why, this house, so full of boisterous living, past, present, and future, was no bigger than their bedroom at home! Not as big, really. There were two rooms in the cabin, about equal in size. When Mrs. Larsen saw Amoret realizing this, she said, with modest boastfulness:

"My man Elk is mighty proud of this here house of oun. First five years we only had a one-room cabin, but now we're right comfortable."

"I can see you are," Amoret said valiantly.

"A lot of people ain't got glass in their windows," one of the children pointed out.

"We was powerful lucky about that," Mrs. Larsen said

complacently. "Last year a store up over yonder got a whole shipment of window sashes. They come around by coastal vessel from some place in New England. Landed at New Orleans, Elk says, and then they come by steamboat up the Mississippi River. Elk got us three of 'em. Cost us right smart . . . a sow apiece, and a calf thrown in for the lot. But it certainly has been worth it to have glass in our windows. Glass in a house is like diamonds on a woman, Elk says." A quick breeze of mirth blew through her face; the mere mention of diamonds was humorous, diamonds being so far removed from any plausibility.

"Things is pretty expensive around here. Unless you pay with money," she continued soberly. "But land sakes, who's got any money!" She laughed heartily at this, so Amoret and Stephen laughed also.

"Elk says this here house woulda cost us probably two hundred dollars anyway. And his barn and woodhouse . . . well, we know some folks built a barn not as good as Elk's, and it cost them four hundred dollars."

The sashes about which they were all so proud, were stingy little six-paned windows, as narrow as half-shut eyes. They gave the room a crafty, shrewd look. Darkness had come down now, and in each pane there flickered a bright miniature of the fireplace, with the supper-fire glowing in pots hung on chains from two iron arms. The fireplace, a huge stone structure filled in with dried clay and mud, was the heart and soul of the cabin. Each piece of furniture in the simple room seemed to have its eye fixed on the fireplace, as if waiting for orders. The wall between the two rooms was made of rough boards, so badly joined that even from here wide cracks were visible. Both doors of the house were opened, to draw in as much breeze as possible from this warm twilight. But even so, the room scarcely breathed in the heat and gloom.

The furniture was as crude as the house itself. Mrs. Larsen went back to preparing the meal at a kind of shelf built along the wall beside the fireplace. In the middle of the room was a small table, covered by a piece of coarse brown calico with simple blue-rimmed dishes set out, and two-tined forks and big steel knives.

"Come over here to the sideboard and help mama," Mrs. Larsen called out to the oldest girl, Emily. Sideboard? Amo-

ret looked around, and then she realized that this was what they wistfully called the shelf of boards supported by the wall.

"Set down, Mrs. Phelps, and make yourself comfortable. There ain't a thing you can do to help me." She motioned Amoret toward a bench made of a halved log, with the rounded, barked surface turned toward the floor. It was supported by four stout pegs set in at an angle for stability. There were also a couple of three-legged stools made of disks cut from a log.

But the pride of the house was plainly its chairs, four in number. There was a staunch, honest beauty about these simple, wide-bottomed chairs with hickory bark plaited to make a seat. The shadows of the chairs, tall and strong, climbed up the side of the wall and dominated the whole house. The eye of the fireplace, lying low against the floor, seemed to be doing all it could to magnify the size of the furnishings in great flickering shadows.

One corner of the room was crowded with farm implements, hoes, axes, rakes, flails and wooden forks, all obviously homemade. Standing here in the corner after their day's work was finished, they looked touchingly human, like good homemade people. Above them various herbs were suspended from the roof, bundles of sticks with dried leaves clinging to them, sage and tansy and camomile. Other brittle clumps were inscribed in bright red peppers, like the cabalistic characters for some mystic rune. Beside the fireplace hung several hams and bacon-sides, smoked almost black, and scribbled over with a rime of salt, like hoarfrost. A leathery brisket of beef was all that was left from the winter's cow.

"Step in and look at the bedroom, Mrs. Phelps," Mrs. Larsen called out hospitably. "You might as well get acquainted with the whole house."

The bedroom had two huge beds; under one a trundle bed had been pushed. They were "made up" with bright patch-work quilts, and though they had been smoothed over carefully, they gave a choppy appearance like a storm-tossed sea, because their ticks were filled with corn husks.

"We can sleep six in there just as easily as not," Mrs. Larsen shouted cheerily. "You can see there'll be plenty of room for you-all just as long as you want to honor us with your comp'ny." Stephen, looking over Amoret's shoulder, at-

tempted to solve the mathematics of the sleeping, then gave it up hopelessly. Besides the beds, there was a large loom, set up now with a half-finished blanket.

"That's my weaving," Mrs. Larsen explained. "We don't do so much of it as we used to. Ain't got time, seems like. When Elk and me first come out, we made everything we wore. But now we got stores over yonder a little piece."

Stephen went in and felt of the blanket. It was warm and soft, with an aggressive pleasant plaid woven in, a red thread, a handful of blue and then a band of chocolate brown, and all this laid against a dull cream background. He asked his fingers to draw their own conclusions; the mind was too shocked to think very clearly now, so the body must do the thinking for awhile. The body must be hot and tired and hungry, so that the mind would not peer into the abysmal depths of its own despair. This whole room, this whole trip, was too incongruous and grotesque to believe. He let himself become a puppet now, unthinkingly pulled into strange antics and postures without protesting comment.

He kept saying inside himself, "All right, see how much more God-awful you can be! Go ahead. Just see." He wasn't sure to whom he was addressing this challenge, but he kept uttering it in the pit of his mind.

Mrs. Larsen was calling in to them chattily. "One thing, you got here on an awful good night. We got right good victuals in the skellet," she said smugly. "I hope you people are nice and hungry." She went on talking to them in a steady trot. "Some people say the darkest hour is just before the dawn, but I always say that the darkest hour for the spirit is just before dinner. You're liable to get right discouraged when your stomach's empty. Ain't any use payin' much attention to what you think when you're hungry. Just wait'll you line your insides with some good cornbread and a nice slice of pork and you see the whole world different. That's what I tell Elk."

Her small blackberry eyes were kind and understanding. She was telling more than Elk; she was telling them. For once Stephen himself saw this, and creature gratitude thawed his numbness. He got up and came over to her and looked with deliberate, gallant interest at what she was doing.

"I expect you tell your husband a great deal of very useful wisdom," he said, with almost painful kindness in his voice.

She was so overwhelmed by this sudden focus of praise upon her that she dropped her knife on the floor, picked it up and wiped it carefully on her calico hip, then went on hacking away at a corn dodger.

"Why, goodness me, you tell Elk something like that and he'll laugh fit to bust. Elk says a woman don't know nothin'! I say to him if a woman's smart she makes believe she don't know nothin'! Run in there and get the honey out for mama, Emily," she said excitedly, to change the unbearably thrilling subject. "We keep the honey under the bed. It's a little cooler in the other room and the flies don't churn around in there like they do out here."

The child could be seen now, lying flat on her stomach with the large jar of honey pulled out from under the bed. She was scooping up a cupful, then cleaning the edge of the cup tidily with her finger and licking off the finger deliciously.

"Emily, you'll roon your appetite," her mother said, not even turning around to see what was happening, knowing it so well. "Now if papa would just come, we could set down."

Tom lurched in through the door with a slopping pail of water from the well. "Papa's here!" he shouted. "He's just drove into the barn."

Mrs. Larsen bent over and whispered to her son, "You go out and tell him we've got comp'ny. Tell him he's to act nice when he comes in, too."

The man of this house was a surprise when he finally came to the door. He was older than they had expected, a short, blunt white-haired man with a puckered seam from an old gash across one cheek.

He was wearing a blue shirt, with permanent wrinkles faded into it from long days in the fields. He wore but one suspender, slung diagonally across his chest and attached to his dust-colored pantaloons. This gave him a very jaunty look, as if he were a minstrel with an invisible singing instrument hanging from his shoulder.

A curtain of silence fell across the children at his approach. But they all looked at him with love under their respect. You could see that the woman herself would have been suffocated also by this blanket of silence had not her spirit, her gay loquacious spirit, demanded that it keep itself alive by talk through all these nine years of hardship and loneliness.

"That's my man Elk," she said, looking around at him with shy pride. "I been tellin' the folks about you, honey," she added. "Take your hat off, don't forget."

His hand was halfway up to remove his hat, but at her words it dropped defiantly.

"Opal wanted to be a schoolteacher afore she married me," he said with a slow humorous drawl. "She can always tell everybody how to do things. Don't pay no heed to her, ma'am. That's how I git along with her so good."

"A fine schoolteacher I'd have been," she said with healed merriment over the old wound. "Why, I can't even read."

She stopped what she was doing, dropped her hands humbly to her sides, and turned to look eagerly at Amoret.

"Kin you read, Mrs. Phelps? If you can, maybe you and me could strike up some kind of a trade. Maybe I could show you how to dry apples, or maybe I could do some weavin' for you on my loom, or somethin' like that . . . and you could teach me how to read. I certainly would admire to learn."

"And what would you read?" her husband said to her kindly. "We ain't got a thing in this house you could lay your eyes to. Learnin' would just get you into trouble. Then we'd have to worry about gettin' some books."

Amoret said, surprising herself, "I can teach you while you do the housework, or weaving or something."

Mrs. Larsen's eyes grew bigger in her pinched little face. She wanted terribly to express her thankfulness, but she didn't know how to do it.

"Well, I sure am glad you come, Mrs. Phelps," she said as spontaneously as a child. "I just thought this morning when I woke up that if *something* nice didn't happen to me pretty soon . . . and you see, now it has!"

Her gaiety infected the whole room; the very candles seemed to stand up taller, and doff their flames like the hats of a cheering populace. The fire on the hearth broke out in a last chuckle of blaze.

Throughout the banter the big woodsman kept eyeing Stephen's clothes with a mixture of admiration and amusement. Finally he said, "I reckon I oughtn't to speak about it, in a personal way like this, but I certain'y admire that there watch you've got on that chain. I seen it first thing."

Stephen took it out of his waistcoat pocket and passed it across to the big man, who squinted at it ardently.

"I kin read figgers," he said. "A man wouldn't have to be an educated man, really, to read a watch, would he?" He handed it back carefully, and then sighed.

"Well, I reckon such things don't belong with such people as the Larsens. Not yet awhile, anyway."

"Everything's cooked now. We can build up the fire and eat gay, like we was having a party," Mrs. Larsen said delightedly. She swooped down before the fireplace on her knees, and picking up some iron tongs and swinging back the bracket on the wall, she deftly unhooked the pot of wild mustard greens from the chain on which it was hung. There was a terrific clatter of industry as she seized the scraper to shovel aside the embers and pull out the iron skillet. A rich cloud of fragrance came up with the delicious succulent pork, roasted to a crackle. The children were digging potatoes out from the ashes, and for a few moments the whole cabin was filled with noise and confusion and loud outcries of anticipation and praise.

"This here is one of my best meals," Mrs. Larsen said, ingenuously. "I couldn't a done better if I'da knowed you was coming."

It was impossible not to enter into the moment with her. Stephen himself could not resist her kind, simple goodness. He knelt beside her and watched her, and even helped awkwardly, and this jubilantly disgusted the man of the house.

"Don't put any notions in her head, Mr. Phelps," he cried jovially. "She's a woman that ketches notions like a saucer of sorghum ketches flies."

"Go along with you," the little woman cried. "Do *you* a power of good to ketch a few of Mr. Phelps's ways with a woman."

They pulled up the benches and stools, but not the four fine chairs, and sat down before the hearty meal. Everyone in the room, down to the smallest child, was somehow moved by an unexpected solemnity in this occasion. Now Elk did take off his hat, and tossed it across the room.

"You know, I got somethin' to say," he said with sudden dignity. "First time a family eats a meal out here on the prairie is a mighty solemn thing. 'Pears to me it's somethin' like them there Pilgrim Fathers crossin' the ocean and findin' the wilderness, and then havin' to thank God fer everything.

Pears to me the first meal ought to be a kind of Thanksgiving dinner . . . and that's what I aim to have this here meal be fer all of us. The Larsen family is thankful and I expect the Phelps family is, too."

The room, with all its crudity, was suddenly filled with the grace of gratitude. Not for any great thing surely, for what was here was only the everyday miracle of work and kindness and unpius mirth. Here was only the common magnitude of a simple man and a cheerful woman, with a sky of understanding stretching over their heads, and an earthy love lying solid and sure under their feet. They farmed this love as they farmed their other land, getting from both food and danger and mystery and psalms to nurture each other and their children.

Once again, trembling desire to give something . . . to do something . . . welled up in Amoret. She had felt exactly like this once before. When was that? Oh, yes . . . the Martins, the dear poor Martins, so blessedly ignorant they did not even know how poor they were. These people . . . this moment, was something like that. Only better. Much better, because this was going to last. This was going to grow into a tomorrow. That had been but a prayer; this was the answer to the prayer. That was the bread; this was the bread and wine itself.

She had tried to break that bread with Stephen, but he had not wanted it. Now he was having it himself, he was a part of it at last, and he couldn't help seeing. She would love him a million times more deeply than she had ever loved him before, because now at last he would see what she saw, what his father had wanted him to have and know and be.

They had lost everything they could possibly lose; they had come to the lowest extremity of bad fortune, you might think. Yet there she had found this sweet unearthly happiness. She thought that in all her life she had never felt such overwhelming joy as she knew at this moment.

Stephen was saying something now. Not the suave graceful Stephen, but a new quiet-speaking man who had to fumble for words and could not find them.

"I'd like to add something to that, Mr. Larsen," he said. "But I just don't know what I *can* add."

"I know," Amoret cried. "It is Thanksgiving, and I want to give something, too. I have something I can give!"

In a moment she was up from the table, and had run over to the chair where she had laid her bundle. She had it opened in a second and was back beside the table, holding the book to her breast. She looked around bravely at all their uptilted faces, but at Stephen's face she was half-afraid to look, for fear he would leap up and take the book away from her. His face was full of dull misery and reproach as if he could not bear the treachery of her happiness. Then his eyes kindled with a look of helpless, enslaved love for her, and for a second that seemed more bliss than she could bear.

But then, as if she had left her own body and had entered his, she knew that the light from the fireplace had tangled in her hair, and had scooped out voluptuous hollows in the cream of her skin, and that in his imagination Stephen was fitting his lips sensually to the hollows. That was all he was seeing, in a diffusion of agonizing numbness and desire. For a moment she wavered, and the light and innocence went out of her in a swirl of dark confusion. Then she heard Mrs. Larsen's thin, happy little voice.

"My land," Mrs. Larsen breathed. "She's going to read us something. Seems like we just *ought* to have something read!"

She bent her head and opened the book. Her mind had looked away from Stephen, and had closed a door upon what was in his face. Her hands were trembling, but she stood up as tall as she could, as if she were taking a secret vow, as if she were making a public declaration of loyalty and love. If Stephen had risen and had tried to touch her now she would have struck him across his importunate mouth. But he was looking down at the crude plate in front of him. He was a picture of despair and shame, blind to the blaze that was burning in this room.

She had no idea where to search for something appropriate to read, for this was a book through which she did not yet know her way. "Just give me something beautiful for them," she cried wordlessly to herself, and wordlessly she heard an answer in the tired old voice of Gramma Martin. "Make shore you start everything you do with the Bible. Then no matter what happens. . . ."

The flickering tides of light washed over the page, and she ran her finger down the old column as if it could feel out the right verse. She cleared her voice, then, and read what was written.

"It's Nehemiah," she said, to steady her voice, for in one glance she had seen that the words were as personal as a letter written especially to them.

"Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord; neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

She was so shaken that she could speak no farther. It *was* a letter to them—a letter written from God! The whole table sat in benediction for a moment, then Mrs. Larsen spoke.

"If that ain't the purtiest reading! Just like what Elk was saying, too!"

Elk shifted in his place and expanded with innocent gladness that his wife could hear such words in his tongue.

"Yep, just like I was saying," he said with humble pride. "For whom nothing is prepared" . . . seems like you couldn't find words that would fit this here spot much better. But I reckon there ain't never a place on earth where nothing is prepared, if a man is willing to work, and, like the Bible says, take the joy of the Lord to be his strength."

"And *enjoy* it," his wife added with luminous eyes. "That's the part I like. Seems God is always askin' His children to enjoy themselves. To take what He gives 'em and enjoy it. Don't it seem like?"

Because she had good creature common sense, she knew when to turn the gaze of the soul to something homely and at hand. So she said crisply, "Well, let's enjoy this here good food now, everybody."

They all tasted the food then, and food was never better. It was as Nehemiah had promised, both fat and sweet . . . Thanksgiving strummed along the heartstrings, and under every voice was the quiet melody of gratitude and joy.

(2)

When Elk began tentatively to question Stephen about where they had come from, and what were their plans, Mrs. Larsen quickly interrupted.

"Not now," she said. "Mr. and Miz Phelps have come a

long ways and they're tried, and I don't mean that they should sit here and be questioned by you, Elk Larsen. You wait till tomorrow, or whenever they're fixin' to tell you. Isn't that right?"

"That's perfectly right," Amoret said gratefully. "We haven't anything very exciting to tell. Not exciting like the things you people must know."

"You couldn't have much to tell, you're such a little girl," Mrs. Larsen said protectively. "You don't look much older than Emily here. Pin up Emily's hair, and get her in a long skirt, you and her'd look about the same age. I bet you ain't been married long. That's what you look like to me."

Amoret admitted it with a shy look, and even Stephen laughed out spontaneously, as if the world had not come to an end for him.

"Yep, it's marriage that ages a woman," Mrs. Larsen said. "Marriage and babies, between 'em. One's as bad as the other." She grinned mischievously at her husband. "But either one without the other would be even worse, I reckon. Marriage without babies, or babies without marriage."

"Watch what you're saying, Mrs. Larsen," admonished her husband with dignity.

There was no loitering at the table when the meal was finished. It was not considered good manners in Illinois to linger; that looked as if you hadn't had enough to eat. As soon as everybody's plate was empty, it was burnished scrupulously with a piece of the corn dodger. Then each one leaped from the table and carried his dishes over to the sideboard. The children, long ago organized, fell to cleaning up the supper dishes.

"It's too hot to set indoors, and the mosquitoes is too bad to set outdoors," Elk explained jovially. "Ain't much a body kin do in the summertime except go to bed. But some like that, 'pears to me."

He and his wife went into a whispered consultation in the corner of the room, and Stephen and Amoret knew they were being discussed.

In a few minutes Elk said, blushing but blunt, "Seein' you'uns are still young and like-a that, Opal and me was just saying maybe we could move one of the beds into the lean-to, and kind of stack the provisions we've got stored there up in one corner, and let you sleep in there by yourselves."

"We can't disarrange your home," Stephen protested. "You've been more than kind . . . I don't know what we can ever do about it. . . ."

"Tain't a thing you wouldn't do for us," Elk said heartily. "That I'm pretty sure of. Once a man gets out here on the prairie he finds out we all got to stick together. Tain't like living in the city. People can afford to be mean to each other in town. But not out here. You jest learn that; 'cause you have to."

They were all doing everything they could to prove they were not remarkably kind. Tom brought out a knife he owned. . . . Probably his only treasure . . . and tried to give it to Stephen for a present.

"Why, mister, I don't need it. I don't hardly ever see anything I want to kill with it," he said earnestly.

You'd have thought that moving their bed into the lean-to for the company to sleep in, was what the children had desired for months.

"We been wanting to sleep on the floor for a long time, Mr. Phelps," Tom said. "Mamma just wouldn't let us do it. We heerd a family over yonder sleep that way all the time. I'm goin' roll me up nice and nekkid and sleep right on the floor."

So the eight of them, making a great deal of noise about it, took down one bed and carried it into the lean-to. There were stout leather ropes laced back and forth between the bed-boards, with a windlass to keep them from sagging, and the finest, rustlingest tick of corn shucks you ever listened to.

The lean-to was a narrow little slit of a room swooning limply against the outside wall of the house, stacked with kegs of lard, and hogsheads of corn meal, and Elk's home-grown tobacco, and even the flax and cotton which Opal hadn't had time to spin for her weaving. They all tugged and shoved, even the youngest child helping, and at last one end of the lean-to was cleared for the bed. Its width was miraculously just the length of the bed. They set it up and were as pleased as if they had discovered another room in their mansion.

"Course the lean-to ain't got no floor," Mrs. Larsen said apologetically, as if she would have built one herself this very afternoon if she had realized in time. "But I always say a nice dirt floor is cooler in summer. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you my braid rug, Mrs. Phelps." She ran to the cupboard

and got out a bright, hideous little lopsided oval, obviously too beloved to be used. "I don't know what I was keepin' this for anyway," she said, recklessly putting it down in front of the bed.

"You people had a hard day, so you just sleep as late as you want to tomorrow. Don't make no difference to me if you don't get up till seven o'clock."

(3)

Amoret lay in the dark and listened to the pulse of the night, beating like a great noisy heart, and above the heart-beat a thousand night-voices, and the plucked strings of myriad insects. Cicadas and crickets played cellos as they balanced on the tall waving weeds of the prairie; one sensed the prowling horror of wolves, close to the ground, with their eyes glowing like carnelians. Through the cracks of the outer wall, she could see the bright glitter of the sky, and under it the reflectionless depths of the undulant prairie. Long after she and Stephen had said good night, she lay and listened.

Gradually she knew there was another sound under all the mysterious night-noises, a terrible rough sound she had never heard before. It twisted her feelings into a thread, and thrust it inescapably through a small needle-eye. She drew back from realizing what it was, but there was no escaping the needle-eye of knowing that her husband was lying beside her sobbing.

She tried to breathe rhythmically, while she frantically decided what to do. It would be better if he never knew she had heard. This would be one last indignity that she might spare him. But she would not do that; a month ago she might have. Too much had happened to her in this last month; she knew that never again would she deal with Stephen by ignoring, or pretending. Never again would she deal with anything by pretending not to see it. It was a stark and terrible realization, like a plunge into ice water, almost as startling to her mind as the sound of Stephen's sobs were in her ears. She could not let him go on like this. She knew in the dark that his face was turned away from her, but he was sobbing with his whole racked body. In the darkness she felt infinitely bigger than he, as if he were a small, hurt creature and she,

large, disembodied, mothering. As the mother of the universe itself must feel when a little world grieves.

She crept over to him . . . around him, really, surrounding him by a new comfort which neither of them ever had felt before. He turned to her then, and buried his wet, hard face in the soft crescent of her throat and breast. She held his head as if it were all of him, close to her. Her thin embroidered nightdress had slipped back from her shoulder, and she gathered it around him tenderly enclosing him in it as if it were a woman's shawl in which she might wrap a babe. What she murmured to him had no words really; it was only a mother-hush.

"What will happen to us?" he said. "I can't bear this, Amoret. It's the end of everything. I've hardly money enough to get us back home . . . but we can't go home."

"We are at home," she said. "That's the first thing to realize, darling. We *are* at home."

"I can't stay here," he said. "I loathe this place."

"You don't know it yet," she said. "These people . . ."

"There's nothing the matter with them. They fit this land. They belong here. But I haven't that kind of goodness in me . . . that kind of patience . . . I'd turn mean and not mellow . . . I know it, Amoret. And you . . . you couldn't live here . . ."

"Wait and see," she said in a little murmur.

"It's madness . . . it's the most hateful madness to imagine."

"You'll see . . . you'll see, Stephen," she said tracing his puckered eyebrow with her cool finger, in rhythm with the words.

"I expected to have everything wonderful for you. I thought you could write home and tell everybody how well we were doing."

"I'll write home," Amoret whispered cheerfully. "Mrs. Larsen says the neighbors will help us build a house."

"Neighbors? My God! where are there any neighbors in this vacuum?" he said almost angrily. "And if there were any, they'd be the same. . . ."

"We'll build our house," Amoret said. "We'll write home and tell Eliza that we're building our house exactly the way we want it."

"How can we?"

"God gave us our hands, and they'll get us what we need,"

she said confidently. That was what the Martins had told her; now she knew exactly what it meant, and she was not afraid of the meaning.

Then she began to talk to him as if he were a child. She told him about the way they would live, as if she had returned from some country which he feared, only to get him and take him back with her. She told him about the life ahead as if it were a little house which she had already seen. There was no knowing where the words came from; they poured out of her in an up-and-down little lullaby of promise and even of mirth. He lay and listened to her as he had never listened to anything in his life, with every pore of him quiet. When she stopped, thinking perhaps he had fallen asleep, he roused and said:

"Amoret, we've nothing left! How could we do all this you're telling me? Even if we knew how to work, the way these poor miserable wretches work . . . we couldn't do it. We haven't anything left to do it with."

"We have everything left!" she said. "We have what we've never had before, Stephen. Our own life to live. And love to live it with."

"No," he said bitterly. "You'd hate me in a few years . . . in a few months, Amoret. You couldn't stand what's ahead of us."

"Hate you?" she said with laughter. "My darling, I'll make you so big with love . . . I'll make so much out of you because of the way I love you . . . *I'll make so much out of you.*"

The words hung in the darkness above her, and she saw a new meaning in them. She *would* make something new out of Stephen, something literally new. Out of Stephen . . . out of them both.

She slipped from his arms then; curved a little away from him as if she must claim a small privacy, she felt the meaning of their mood changing into something momentous and irrevocable.

She lay with absorbed quietness a few moments, a hush of expectancy holding the room in breathless tensiety, like the waiting pause between two movements of a sonata.

Her whole body was making a slow decision which came surging up from depths she never before had sounded in herself. Her rapt being seemed to be seeking a word it never

before had framed of itself, a word more sublime than any syllable from the easy vocabulary of speech, more eloquent than the quick language of loving gesture. This was intention which would need another life to carry it, another whole lifetime to bear it as cargo. This word, never before formed, she was choosing now to speak voluntarily, knowing that it would lead to a complete sentence of visible meaning.

From somewhere she remembered a beautiful phrase, a sacred phrase waiting to be understood. *The Word made flesh.*

She reached out her hand and touched Stephen with joyous andante in her fingertips. A moment before her hands had been calm and quiet as harp music in twilight. Now they were alive with the fierce gladness of a scarlet trumpet note echoing across mountains and rousing every little twig in every hidden dell to gay alertness.

Her mind was hovering over the moment with delighted commentary quite unlike the cringing withdrawal she often felt within herself. A flood of light seemed to be searching through all of her being, and her mind, heightened to eloquence, was framing bold metaphors to capture new meanings. She was not passive now as a woman usually is passive. She was not a violin or a harp. In this moment, *she* was the strength, the fierce proud power which chooses life gladly. She felt herself like a strong, tightened archer's bow, with its arrow waiting to be shot from the thong, a large bow curved and quivering with strength, and expectant of flight. But this ecstasy was no mere arrow of delight flying along the darkness of veins, along the vaulted corridors of flesh. This was beauty far beyond the reach of flesh . . .

The tiny room was full of peace now; peace seemed to be lapping like quiet waves all through the darkness. Stephen's chin was against her forehead. His heartbeat was like a long rolling wave of an ocean on which her own heart lifted and drifted like seaweed. Already his chest rose and fell in rhythmic sleep, his breathing, deep and satisfied, whispered on the farthest shore of his being in strong rolling waves of comfort.

She would have her child now. She would have that child she desired and had chosen to find for herself. That child she needed so much to help her inherit this earth and heaven.

But still the bud of bliss which had opened within her was not a thing of body but of soul.

CHAPTER THREE

During the next few days Stephen would have burned the drawing of Mount Olympus in chagrin and shame, but the Larsen children rescued it.

"Why, we just never had as purty a pitcher as this," they said. "You could kind of move into that pitcher there and set and enjoy yourself!"

Elk said patiently, "Ain't no use burnin' up a thing like that. This here county probably ain't never had a piece of art before. Be an awful pity to burn it up."

So like a very banner proclaiming Stephen's credulity, the map was fastened upon the rough wall. There, insensible to the irony of it, the Larsen family lived in it, just as Amoret and Stephen had lived a few weeks before. Later, the other neighbors, scattered lonely families with miles between them, and the more gregarious group four or five miles away which was trying to create some semblance of town by building miserable huts into a settlement, heard about it and came over to enrich their eyes upon its beauty. Not to laugh and gloat as Stephen had suspected they were coming, but to look respectfully, with humble astonishment that men could dream such visions of comfort and luxury and grace.

For this was a country where grace was an untouchable fugitive, where, if it lived at all, it blew for only a moment in the harp-sweep of a young willow tree, or raced uncapturable before the wind across a field of grass. They had almost forgotten that men, somewhere in the world, had a choice about their acts, which they could spend any way they pleased. They had forgotten that men might build for beauty's sake, and not as a bulwark against a universe of enmity.

When Stephen inquired where these settlers lived, Elk told him they were building a town two or three miles beyond the staked-out section.

"What do they call that?" Stephen asked.

Elk hesitated, his good face transparent so that you couldn't help knowing he was trying to soften the name. "Well, I tell you," he said slowly. "Folks out here has got to make themselves plenty of humor and jokes. Guess they'd go

crazy if they didn't have jokes a-plenty. So they named that slabsided town of theirs Mount Hollow."

"What's the joke in that?"

"Well, they figgered the reality was jest about as fur as possible from the make-believe city them Easterners expected out here in the wilderness. Ef that was a mountain fer the gods to live on, what they got is jest a hollow fer men to kind of scrunch down in. So they called it Mount Hollow. Makes 'em laugh when they think of it, and laughin' helps 'em bear it."

Mrs. Larsen brushed aside the painful explanation quickly now and turned their attention back to the picture on the wall.

"Be better if they heshed their mouths from laughin' and did a little sober thinkin'," she said. "Why, a pitcher like this could give people a idea. Might make things over fer 'em."

"How d'you mean?" Elk asked doubtfully.

"All the time a woman is weavin', she has to have in her mind a kind of picture of the way she wants her plaid to be. And if a countryside was buildin' itself houses, and people kept a picture like this in the front of their minds, you can't tell what might come of it."

"Course it's a mighty long jump between this here land what we actually got, and this purty pitcher on the wall," Elk said, "but I admire to have it up there anyway, Mr. Phelps."

The white-haired man looked as pleased as a child. "I never thought I'd live to see my house havin' two sech purty things in it, a solid gold watch and now this fine art."

And so the map of Mount Olympus hung on the wall, to Stephen a very diagram of shame and humiliation, and to the others a promise of attainment far past any plausible hoping. But however nebulous were the dreams of buildings and streets and parks drawn on the map, the land deeds which Stephen held were concrete and definite.

"Why, you ain't bad off at all, Mr. Phelps," Elk said admiringly when he saw the deeds. "You got a power of land here. A man and land, if they've a mind to work together, kin do just about anything between 'em."

But Stephen knew that such partnership was not two-sided, but three; the other side of the triangle was ready money, and that side was missing. It had seemed utterly sim-

ple when he had sat in his own library considering this plan. He had bought a great deal of land, and it seemed quite reasonable that at the prices which Western land was then bringing in the East, some of it could easily be converted into money to develop the part he decided to hold. But out here the thought of selling was laughable. The land was the cruel majority; the people a victimized minority. Why, the people here were glutted and strangled by land. Land was swallowing them up, more earth than they could fight against!

"I tell you what we'll do," Elk said. "We'll all hitch up the wagon right after dinner and take the young'uns and go off and look up that land of yourn. I reckon I know just about where it is, from this plat you got here. You must have paid a purty price for it, it being on the river and everything. Why, you're going to have a *good* life out here, Mr. Phelps." His honest, strong old face beamed with unselfish pleasure. "I seen so much hard times in the world, it just does me good to think of somebody gittin' along."

"Well, I haven't really got along yet," Stephen reminded him grimly.

"But you will. That land of yours is some of the purtiest country we got around here. It ain't bald-headed land like this. It's got trees on it, being on the river like it is. I think you'll find it's right next door to where Joel Adams has set himself up."

"There you are," he said enthusiastically after a few minutes of thinking and chewing on his tobacco. "You've even got a neighbor up there next to you. Some people likes neighbors," he added dryly.

As soon as the midday meal was over, the whole family clambered into the creaking wagon and tore off across the plains to see where the Phelps were going to be living.

"All I hope is that it ain't too far away," Mrs. Larsen said wistfully. "Just when I finally got people around me that I like."

"Nothin's fur away, Ma, if you like people enough to go visitin' 'em," Tom said. "This here is going to give us some place we kin go and visit. That's what you always said you wanted."

The land, indeed, was beautiful as they came near it, a rolling, hilly stretch covered with oak and hickory and maple

and walnut trees, edging the river which meandered merrily between the slopes.

They turned into a narrow lane, and a three-ribboned track showed where a wagon and a horse had traveled many times before.

"Something sure took care of you when you bought this land way off there in Pennsylvania," Elk said admiringly. "Most people would have found themselves with a hundred and sixty acres right smack in the middle of the prairie. Hot as the hearth of hell and not a tree to bless yourself with! You could have found yourself plumped right out in the middle of nothin'. But here you got trees and the river and goodness knows what-all."

"Why, you might even have a mill seat on the river! You can't tell," Tom said.

The lane skirted through the trees, sometimes in the limpid green shade, and then in the hot waste of the open prairie. It followed the river longingly, but occasionally it dashed out into the sun as if to remind itself that the shade was only a lovely interlude.

"Just about here is where I reckon you lay," Elk said, suddenly stopping. "Deed says twenty-five rods north from that there stake they put up. That ought to bring you about here, I think."

"But there's a house on this!" Amoret cried. "Isn't that a little house up there on top of that knoll?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's what I was kind of 'fraid of," Elk admitted. "Joel Adams has settled right smack on your land, Mr. Phelps. That certainly is too bad."

"But how could he do that?" Stephen asked. "After all, I have the deed to the land."

"Yep, you got the deed all right," Elk said, "but he's got the land."

He shook his head despairingly. "I was hoping it would turn out that your deed fell to the south a piece. But I'm awful afraid he's settled on your land afore you got out here."

Mrs. Larsen was clucking sadly, and the children, who had started to scramble down from the wagon and explore, sat just where they were.

"What makes it specially bad," Elk said, "is that Joel Adams is such a nice fella."

"Yeah, that makes it right bad," Mrs. Larsen said commis-

eratingly. "Ef he was some no-count trash now, you could just throw him off, and the neighbors would help you do it. But Joel Adams . . ." She shook her head hopelessly.

"Well," Elk said after a minute, "you'll just have to pay him his improvement rights, that's all."

"Improvement rights? What are those?" Stephen asked.

Elk looked at him in amazement that he should be so ignorant. Then he explained courteously. "Well, you see we got a law around here that if somebody settles on the land and works it, nobody else can legally buy it until four years have passed by. But of course, if you *have* purchased it, and you did it in good faith, you kin pay up for the improvements afore the four years."

"That doesn't seem fair," Stephen said. "After all, it is my land . . . bought and paid for."

"Well, that's a question," Elk said reasonably. "Some men kin pay out of their pockets, and other men have to pay out of the labor of their backs."

"Papa always said money and work is the same thing," Mrs. Larsen said gently.

"If a man ain't got one he kin pay with the other," Elk said. "I hope *you* got a little money."

"But suppose this Adams doesn't want to sell," Stephen asked incredulously.

"Well, that's the chance you take," Elk said. "It's certainly too bad. You want I should call Mr. Adams?"

"He must be around here somewhere," Mrs. Larsen said.

Elk reared back his head on his broad, strong throat and let out a large bellow. The children reinforced it with their own small trebles.

"Must be around somewheres," Mrs. Larsen repeated. "Unless he's had to go down to Mount Hollow for some funeral or like that."

"Funeral?" Amoret asked. "Why would he have to go to a funeral?"

"Well, he's kind of like our preacher," Mrs. Larsen said. "I don't know if he's really a ordained preacher. But he's the one of us around here that happens to be closest to being a preacher."

Elk said boastfully, "He aims some day to git us a church built somewhere, and then I guess he really would be a preacher."

"Right now he don't so much *preach*. He kind of *talks*. But ef we ever git a church . . ." Opal said.

"Oh, he could preach all right," the children said. "He could preach good."

The land was very quiet after this call, only the lilting syllables of the river and the questioning, early-afternoon chirp of the drowsy birds.

"I reckon he's out in his field. Probably workin'. That's where a farmer would be this time of day," Elk said, "ef he wasn't somebody like me, gallivantin' around tryin' to see somethin' new."

They walked out across the rough ground, stirring up a haze of golden grasshoppers before them. Elderberry bushes and wild grapevines were tangled in promiscuous embrace.

"There he is, just like I said," Elk cried, pointing out across the dark moist field, grooved in deeper purple where the plow had etched. The man was only a tall silhouette, standing idle behind his plow and horse.

"Yep, he's readin'. Just like I thought he would be," Mrs. Larsen said with the crackle of envy clashing with affection. "He'd a heerd us comin' up in the wagon ef it hadn't been he was readin'."

Elk laughed aloud, "This here land you're gittin', Mr. Phelps, is going to be some of the most plowed land in Illinois. He jes plows and plows, purely because he fills his mind up with readin' and then fergets what he's doin'."

He dropped his voice, "I'm right ashamed of myself for not gittin' over here to help Mr. Adams break that piece of land. He's goin' to be awful late with his plantin'. He's been cookin' and doin' for the Artor family over in Mount Hollow."

"The Artors had a heap of bad luck," Opal explained. "'Course even when nothin' happens to 'em, they're always a little behind."

"Behind? Behind what?" Stephen asked in honest bewilderment.

"Just behind," Elk explained.

Elk took off his old straw hat and shouted again and waved. The horse, balancing a broad gleam of light on the horizontal of its back, lifted its head to listen, and then started to drag the unmanned plow. You saw the man look up vaguely to see why the horse was moving. Then he too heard the cry and looked over, and then he waved.

"I never could see what there is in a book that makes a

man act like he's walkin' in his sleep." Elk shook with mirth, and then he raised his voice again and called lustily.

"Mr. Adams, I reckon you better come over here and talk a minute, if you kin spare yourself from your plowin'." He winked at his family and the Phelpses with broad good humor.

The man didn't come immediately; he finished off the furrow. But now he strode along, paying attention to what he was doing. At the end of the furrow was a broad wind-bent tree marking one corner of the field, a shady place for the horse to rest. The man and the horse were dim, almost symbolic figures on an island of shade surrounded by a brilliant sea of hot sunshine. Amoret had a sudden excited fluttering in her throat, as if she had long known this island of shade, as if she was projected into the future and was looking back across many days as yet unlived, so that the shade of this old tree in the corner of the field became to her something familiar and precious.

The palm of her hand tingled almost as if she knew the rough warm bark of that tree; her forehead felt the prickle of dust from walking across that plowed land carrying something cool for men to drink.

"How do I know that?" she cried to herself. "How do I even know women do such things?"

Now he was out in the sun again, loping toward them with a long, drawling gait. You could not see his face; you could not guess what age he was or what manner of man. There was a wild excitement in trying to guess, as if the quality of the days to come was going to be determined largely by the character of this man. Stephen's face was closed against her, but she could see that he, too, felt a certain unwelcome drama in this moment.

Elk said peremptorily, "You young'uns and you women clear out of here. When men talk business they don't want a passel of women and childrun clutterin' things up."

Mrs. Larsen said with unresentful cheerfulness, "Be a whole lot better business if they did. I reckon men don't want women to get a real good look at the way they carry on their affairs. Don't you think so, Mrs. Phelps?"

But in spite of her sauciness, she lost no time in gathering up the children and shooing them before her to a respectful distance away.

"I hafta laugh at men," Mrs. Larsen said, as the six ineli-

gibles walked along, "always so uppety about what they do. Ever' last one of 'em comes home and talks it over with his woman afterwards."

She sank down on a little hillock of grass and threw off her sunbonnet and leaned gratefully against the trunk of a tree.

"My," she said, "I don't know when I've set down in the middle of the day in the woods. Ain't it purty, Mrs. Phelps? Ain't this a purty world? Ef we just had time to look at it once in a while."

"Where's Mr. Adams's wife?" Amoret asked, sinking down beside her.

"Why, he ain't got any wife. I reckon that's one thing that makes him such a good preacher," she added ingenuously and inconsistently, considering what she professed to think about men depending on women. "That, and him bein' young the way he is," she said after a few minutes.

"Is he young?" Amoret asked in surprise. "Why, I pictured . . ."

"Yep. That's what most people picture about a preacher," she said. "I figger that's why religion ain't got more hold on people than it has got. But religion shouldn't just belong to old people. When Joel Adams talks, he makes it seem young and frisky, and something to use no matter what a body was doing. And besides," she added roguishly, "he's one of those men that's got something about him. . . ."

"Something?" Amoret asked tentatively.

"I don't know what it's called," she said yearningly. "I reckon men wouldn't see it . . . but take a woman now, and *she'd* know. . . . Well, you wait'll you run into him, Mrs. Phelps. . . ."

She slapped lazily at the flies, and with her lower lip protruded, she blew up a column of air to lift the droopy hair from her forehead.

The men in the field were standing in a loose triangle, talking earnestly now.

"I got some news for you, Mr. Adams," Elk said. "I can't say whether it's good news or bad. Dependin' on how you look at it, I reckon."

"What's the matter, Elk?" Joel Adams asked anxiously.

To Stephen's surprise, it was a rich fine voice that spoke out of the man. Not a backwoodsman's voice, but not an educated voice either. His face had a film of dust on it; his

hair was almost silvered with the plow-dust, so that you could not be sure whether he was a dark or a light man. His breeches and brogans were shabby, dissipated clothes which had become familiar to Stephen during the past few days. But even so, there was nobility and distinction in the tall, spare frame that rose above both clothes and occupation.

Stephen found himself speaking quickly, and under that impulse he recognized that this was because he found it necessary to establish himself early with this man, who was looking at him with grave, intelligent scrutiny.

"I'm Stephen Phelps, Mr. Adams," he said, trying to get the reins of the interview firmly in his own hands. "I own some land out here, and we've come over to ascertain just where it lies."

"Ain't no use beatin' around the bush," Elk said brusquely. "Pretty clear to me, it lies right here under your feet, Mr. Adams."

The keen dark eyes didn't leave Stephen's face at Elk's words, but continued their quiet, deliberate measuring.

"You don't look like a farmer, Mr. Phelps," he said slowly.

Anywhere else in the world Stephen would have said, "I'm a gentleman farmer," but some discretion saved him from saying that.

"I know something about farming," he said instead, more curtly than he intended. "Not about Illinois farming, of course," he added humbly.

"You'll learn," Joel Adams said, and then for the first time he smiled and unexpectedly he reached out, and the two men shook hands as equals. Elk looked from one to the other of them as if there must have been some dialogue between them which he had somehow missed hearing.

"Well, glad to see you two are going to git along all right," he said redundantly. But still neither man looked in his direction.

"So it was your land I picked," the farmer said. "Well, that gives us something in common we can start with. A bond between us."

"About as much bond as two men who are hankerin' after the same woman," Elk said and slapped his thigh with raucous mirth. But still nobody paid any attention to him, and he began to feel as if he must have been stricken with invisibility. He stopped laughing very suddenly and spat self-

consciously on the ground. "I sent the women and young'uns away, because I thought you two might like to talk business, seein's you got something you have to settle between you," he said, establishing his contribution to this meeting. "I always think people can do that better by theirselves, without a lot of on-lookers standin' around."

Then Joel Adams did look at him. "That's right, Elk," he said genially. "You're perfectly right about that. I know Mr. Phelps will thank you, and so will I, for leaving us by ourselves."

"Well, now wait a minute," Elk said. "It was me that thought of comin' over here." He looked so completely disappointed that Stephen thought he could do no less than intervene.

"I'm sure it will be all right to have Mr. Larsen listen to whatever we have to say," he said somewhat awkwardly. But the other man shook his head, smiling so amiably that there was no arguing about it.

"No. He has the right notion," he said firmly. "Two people can talk about the business between them much better if there's not a third party present. Elk said so himself." He waited a polite moment for Elk to act upon his own theory, while the white-haired man looked sheepish and half-angry, like an ousted boy.

"Won't take us long, Elk," the preacher said reassuringly. "You step over there with the women and young'uns, and we'll join you in a few minutes."

Elk had no choice but to go; he had been dismissed as if he'd been no older than his own Tom. He scuffed along crossly, muttering to himself, and wondering what he'd say to keep Opal from guessing exactly what had happened.

The man said to Stephen, when Elk was out of earshot, "You have a beautiful farm here, Mr. Phelps. You'll get mighty fond of it. I've been here only a little more than two years, and I love every foot of it."

Stephen found nothing to say to this.

"I knew when I was pickin' it, I was pickin' the best there was," Mr. Adams said. "I knew likely I wasn't goin' to be able to keep it . . . or buy it for myself even. . . . Unless something wonderful came about. But I picked the best, because I was going to put my best into it."

Stephen shifted awkwardly, still not knowing just what to say.

"I built that house," the man continued. "I had a little help from the neighbors. But I built most of it myself. Took me quite awhile. But it's a fine little cabin."

"How much do you estimate that you've put into the place? How much are the improvements worth to you?" Stephen asked, nimbly adapting his language to the terms he had heard Elk use.

The other man looked off across the land and a strange hidden expression came into his eyes. Without knowing quite why, Stephen felt that he had committed a *gaucherie*, that he had somehow insulted this man, and would find no words to apologize because he could not guess the exact dimensions of the offense. But then the look healed in Adams' eyes, and he turned and smiled frankly.

"It's hard to say," he answered. "If I was to render a bill for these two years, I guess I wouldn't know where to start counting. There isn't money enough on earth to pay for what I've suffered . . . nor money enough to buy the happiness I've had. If I was to turn in a bill, I guess I'd just have to draw it up so it would read like a psalm. The way a psalm reads, made out of mortal agony and then rejoicing," he said almost to himself.

Stephen thought, "I'm going to like this man. He's going to be a kind of refuge for me out here among these mud-brained wretches."

The squatter shifted his position, and looked from Stephen's face out across the open field to the tree with his horse and plow waiting docilely.

"And then, if the land itself was to measure up a bill that I owed *it* for what it has put into me . . . well, I guess we'd have two psalms. It's hard to say who is the debtor and who is the creditor. I don't know rightly whether I owe the land or the land owes me."

Then, although he was repeating a gesture which had been expressed only a few minutes before, he reached out again and shook hands with Stephen. This time, Stephen felt confused because it was as if the man were reassuring him, as if their positions had been reversed, and Stephen were the squatter.

"You don't have to worry about anything, Mr. Phelps," he

said. "I don't mean any harm. I haven't got it in me to take anything from anybody that don't belong to me. And I can tell when I look at you that you're the same kind of a man. So neither of us has to worry about it. We'll figger it out some way so it'll be fair to both of us."

Stephen was so disconcerted by the guilelessness of this that he hardly knew what to say.

"There seems to be plenty of land," he stammered. "I suppose if you wanted to go on living in your house . . . and working your field . . ."

"We'll let the thing kind of grow out of itself," Joel Adams said. "I find that's the best way to do things. You kind of plant a seed and you let it grow out of itself. Otherwise you get somethin' right monstrous sometimes, when you try to decide it all in advance. We'll just kind of wait, shall we?"

Stephen nodded in spite of himself; he still wanted in some way to indicate that it was he who was in charge of this situation, but he could not quite find the gesture.

"Let me show you my little house. I built it good enough so that whoever was going to live in it would find it a manerly, weather-tight, land-worthy little home." They were walking along toward the others now, swinging into step, for they were both long-legged men.

It was then that Stephen became conscious of the book which Adams held under his left arm, hugged close to his body. The sun glinted redly on the tops of the pages, and suddenly Stephen recognized what book it was. He felt his whole body stiffen with rejection. So . . . that was it. He was being got around by one of those mealy-mouthed, self-righteous prigs. Wheedlers, turners of the other cheek, who use this method to make people do what they want. That was the clue to that assumption of superiority and authority the man was exerting. And he had almost fallen into it; he had found himself *liking* the fellow. . . .

His very joints felt stiff with rage. This was not a new anger; this was that old familiar one, reinforced, in fact, by the long-watched rage of his brother Horace against his father. This is how Horace must have felt when their father opposed some cherished plan by soft-voiced gentleness which, with every sentence, drove the younger man into noisier and less rational fury. He had seen his brother speechless with rage, flailing impotently at what seemed to be only mist. But

it was against an undeclared opposition that disguised its method but not its intent. Tobias had never affected Stephen this way, because he wanted Stephen to have everything he desired. They had never been at arms' length or cross-purposes as Tobias had been with his older son. But now, because of his feeling against this stranger, he understood why, under all their genuine admiration and affection, his father and his brother had been, in their hearts, enemies.

There is a kind of enmity keener than any open grappling could be, and this was it. It was the ancient angry protest which reasonable, self-sufficient men feel against those who seek to have their own strength ratified by some Power above themselves, making themselves, and, hence, their adversaries, subservient to some invisible unmentioned demand of behavior. A man could fairly meet another man and be willing to be defeated by force against force. But if force is met only with kindness. . . .

His rage fell easily into the shape of Horace's anger. Almost with relief it took that shape. But it was a cleaner, less personal rage than Horace's had been. This immediate resentment was exuberant and free because it was uncomplicated by any loyalty or love. This anger rushed through him like a cleansing hurricane; he let it run on blindly, enjoying the violence.

He broke off his thoughts suddenly. What was all this about? He didn't have to enter into any enmity now; he owed this man nothing at all, not even conflict. The thing to do was to dispose of him quickly, repossess his own land and get along with this abominable situation as painlessly as possible. Deliberately he dropped out of step with Adams, unwilling even to give the appearance of casual physical agreement between them.

"There must be someone around here who could appraise the value of your labor," he said curtly. "I'll have a man come out from Springfield. Then I'll offer you a fair price for it."

Yes, that was the way to talk to him, this patronizing backwoodsman, this farmer, this smooth-voiced fanatic who had to tote his book along wherever he went, like a baby hanging onto its rattle. It was ridiculous to let him get the upper hand and speak condescendingly. The other man was looking at him, and it further infuriated Stephen that there was almost pity in his face.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Mr. Phelps," he said.

"Afraid? I don't quite know what you're talking about," Stephen said. "It's simply a matter of business."

Seeing them approaching, the children ran and flung themselves at Adams, falling against him like puppies as they ousted each other from being "Next." The younger children seized his free hand, whimpering because they couldn't both hold onto him. There was such a ridiculous scuffle that Stephen had to fall behind.

"We got a new calf, Mr. Adams," Nora, the youngest child, said. "Pa let me feed it. It sucked milk off'n my fingers when I held my hand in the milk pail."

"Its mother died," Joey, the little boy, explained. "Pa was awful mad at her for dyin'."

Tom said boastfully, "We slept on the floor a couple of nights, Mr. Adams." The man with the book still under his arm paid no special attention to the children. His way with people was far subtler than easily given attention, Stephen thought resentfully. And the children were falling over themselves with simple eagerness to gain his notice. Probably adults would be much the same. . . .

"Are you a man who needs someone else to tell you what is right to do, Mr. Phelps?" Adams asked gently, as if he were unaware of the children's clamor. "Two men of good will can come to an agreement about anything."

"That's backwoodsmen's talk," Stephen said, with forced geniality covering his impatience and distaste. "I don't know where you have spent your time, Mr. Adams. Where I come from, we buy expert judgment and apply it to our own use. We respect expert opinion. . . ."

"I see," Adams said. "Out here we respect ourselves and other men the same way. It's not opinions, but other men's labor we respect out here."

"Labor, hmm?" Stephen said thoughtfully. "Labor is the West's money, it seems to me."

"No. It's more than money. Work is one of the things you can't always buy out here. No matter how much money you might have to buy it with."

"Is that so?" Stephen allowed his voice to sound impudently amused.

"Work, like kindness itself, is something a man makes up his own mind about giving, out here. You see, we're way behind the times. We haven't caught up with all the new

fangled short-cuts you smart men out East know. We still believe in each other and in God and in work. . . ."

"That is your God, in the West," Stephen said. "Work!" He spat the word out impotently.

"Pretty good way to judge what a man is," Joel said kindly, as if he were talking to the children instead of to a man more experienced than he could possibly be. "The work a man does is a pretty good picture of what is inside of him. His character, you might say. . . ."

The three adults had risen to their feet now, as the larger group approached, and Mrs. Larsen had tucked up her hair and put on her bonnet, and was looking as nearly like a pretty woman as a homely woman can, for she was gazing trustingly toward someone she knew would show her only admiration and kindness.

"Well, Mr. Adams," she said. "I guess you-all didn't expect comp'ny today! We-all certn'ly are tickled to git over here and see you again."

The fellow spoke very pleasantly to Mrs. Larsen, and then, without turning his face, he paid Amoret the tribute of his eyes. But Stephen noticed that he looked back again to the older woman quickly. Well, whatever incendiary Western nonsense might be inflaming his mind, at least he had a semblance of manners about him, Stephen thought grudgingly.

But Amoret was looking at him with that naïve frank interest in all kinds of people which he had noticed had come upon her since they had started on this trip. He must speak to her sometime about it. The child's whole world had turned topsy-turvy. Nevertheless the ordinary levels of graded behavior must be maintained, perhaps even more strictly out here than they usually were. He stepped over closer to her and by this movement diverted her gaze from the stranger's face.

"My dear," he said with authoritative formality, "may I present Mr. Adams to you?"

Adams, now given permission by the lady's husband, turned his whole body about and bowed with a rather quaint formality to Amoret.

"I'm very honored to make your acquaintance, ma'am," he said. "It would give me a great deal of pleasure if I might show you and Mr. Phelps the house that I've built on your property."

Before Amoret could say a word, Stephen rushed in with a

great clatter of graciousness and comradeship.

"Yes, indeed, let's all go up and have a look at it," he said. "I don't doubt that you've made quite a fine home up there, Adams. I noticed from your good straight furrows that you're a man who knows what he's doing."

"I'd like to take your praise for that," Adams said. "But I'm afraid that credit ought to go to my horse. I was plowing a furrow in another field."

"What field?" Amoret asked, to Stephen's surprise. She didn't usually participate in a conversation her husband was having with a workman.

The man had not expected anyone to take up this remark. Consternation was pink on his face, because Amoret had spoken directly to him. Adams' confusion delighted Stephen. He saw now that Amoret had quite skillfully adapted herself to the easier etiquette of the prairie. Matter of fact, her question was going to make the bumptious upstart slightly ridiculous, if he wasn't careful. Her cool, explicit little question had dragged his ill-timed poesy right out into the sober daylight.

Tom, the boy, answered for him, providentially saving the big farmer from the clumsiness of an explanation. "I know what field you're talking about, Mr. Adams," he said. "Pa said you had a book restin' on your plow-handles. I reckon you were probably plowing up some little corner of your brain, maybe, gittin' ready to plant somethin' in it."

Adams looked enormously pleased by the child's remark, as if someone had made him a very handsome gift.

"That's exactly what I was doing, Tom," he said. "Nobody could have said it better than you have. I was making a place in my mind that will be 'green pastures beside still waters.'"

"My," the little boy said. "That's better than I could have said it. That sounds like poetry."

"It is," the big man said. "Some of the oldest poetry in the world, son."

(2)

It was almost twilight when the wagon started home again, the Larsens still garrulous with the adventure of visitin'. Amoret was so silent that Mrs. Larsen asked why that was.

"I'm just beginning to get some of the prairie quietness into me," Amoret said.

"Don't talk to me about that there prairie quietness," Mrs. Larsen said. "I fights it tooth and nail every minute of my life. Ef I didn't fight it, it'd sure git me."

All the way home, the children and Mrs. Larsen talked about what they had had to eat.

"I never tasted finer pumpkin meal than that there he's got," Opal said admiringly. "Most of us gits our dried pumpkin ground up to coarse, but his must've been as fine as wheat flour is in the East."

"He's a big powerful man," Elk called back to them, though he had apparently paid no attention to the conversation. "Got to use up that strength on somethin'. Ain't got no young'uns to spank nor any ole woman to beat ef she gits sassy. Might as well grind up his punkin flour good."

Mrs. Larsen ignored this, with a wink at Amoret. "Men folks always tryin' to find some way to make a joke about Mr. Adams," she explained. "He's just so plain ornery-wonderful, seems like it irks them."

Even the children were pleased because everything was going to work out so fine for everybody.

"I see the whole thing different, Mr. Phelps," Elk said, as they were nearing the last vague mile before his own house. "I wasn't sure whether it was going to be a good thing or a bad thing that your land happened to be the very spot where Joel Adams had took up squatters' rights. But now I see it's a mighty good thing. You and him both bein' men with book learnin' and things like that."

"The kind of men we are doesn't exactly alter the situation, Mr. Larsen," Stephen said. "It's merely a question of property rights."

"Property rights?" Mrs. Larsen said from the back of the wagon, with her usual sprightly interest in learning anything new she could pick up anywhere. "Has property got any rights? I thought people was the only thing that had rights in this world."

"Hush your mouth, Opal," her husband said kindly. "You're askin' about something you don't know nothin' about."

"Land sakes! how's a body goin' to learn if he puts up

fences around all kinds of subjects and won't let his brains graze in 'em none?" she inquired good-naturedly.

Elk resumed his dialogue. "The way I see it now, it's a mighty good thing you've got Joel Adams on your land. He's somebody can help you, Mr. Phelps. I 'spose you kin help him, too, but in the long run I reckon he's goin' help you more than you're goin' help him."

"The only help I need right now," said Stephen, trying not to sound too curt about it, "is a lawyer. I suppose you have some kind of lawyers down in Springfield?"

"Lawyers?" Elk nearly screamed. "What in the world do you need a lawyer for? You're not aimin' to have any trouble, are you?"

"Of course not. Lawyers are supposed to keep people out of trouble."

"Not in the West they ain't," Elk said. "Lawyers in the West is supposed to back a man into trouble in sech a position that he kin win, whether he's right or wrong. 'Course, if a man is right, he don't need any lawyer, really. Right'll just carry him through, in that case."

"I'll want to go down to Springfield," Stephen said, overlooking this backwoods philosophy. "I'll want to make certain my deeds are properly registered in the Land Office before I do any developin' at all. You happen to know a good lawyer down there, Mr. Larsen?"

"They is a man named Stuart who is going to be elected to our Congress, they tell me," he said. "He'd be a kind of nice, stylish lawyer fitten for a man like you, I guess," he said slowly. "But if you don't like him, you'll find ten more of 'em in Springfield, just sittin' there waitin' for trouble to come up."

The strong old face was fierce and angry now. He had put up with this man because he figgered he was just so educated he was plumb ignorant. But now he was more than ignorant. He was both ignorant, and suspicious of a good man like Joel Adams. That was the kind of people Elk couldn't bear. Opal had said they'd have to be kind to the Phelpses, so that was all there was to it. Well, they'd be kind, but they didn't have to be friendly, unless they wanted to be. You had to be kind to everybody, but you could pick the people you wanted to be friends with.

The town of Springfield seemed even drearier than it had on Stephen's first trip through it. It was the more obnoxious because it was so thriving and sure of itself. Though there were but fifteen hundred people who lived in it, there were eighteen thousand in Sangamon County whose burgeoning wants were served by its stores, its doctors, its grog-shops, and its eleven lawyers.

Around the square in the center of the town were all kinds of places of business, four public houses, a bookstore, nineteen dry-goods stores, six general stores, and a great many physicians' shingles, not to mention the county jail and the bank. The dry-goods stores were stocked with a motley of droll luxuries, Cashmere shawls and lace handkerchiefs, men's ruffled silk shirts, smelling salts, embroidered fans, hand-painted chamber pots, elbow-length gloves, and bouquets of artificial flowers. It taxed your imagination to picture these things swallowed up in this desolation. But there they were, undoubtedly being sold and bought with satisfaction. You simply had to get used to seeing black Illinois mud and lace and silk consorting together.

Stuart's office was located in a two-story building at Number 4 Hoffman Row, a shabby little room with a badly made-up bed and an unpolished stove, upstairs over the courtroom. A gangling, countrified man was sitting on the only chair in the place. He had it tipped on its back legs with his big shaggy head against the rude wall. He was exploring his teeth with a goosequill; an open book sprawled on his pulled-up knees. He didn't rise when Stephen came into the room, but he did reluctantly close the book and let the front legs of the chair fall down to the floor in attention.

"Can I serve you, sir?" he asked in a rasping drawl, unexpectedly thin for such a big man.

Stephen nearly said, "Well, you can at least get up on your feet." Then he decided that if he were going to get along at all out here, he'd better not waste his time teaching manners to the yokels.

"I'm looking for Mr. Stuart," he said as pleasantly as possible.

"I'm his partner. I'll be glad to do what I can, sir." He did get up now and motioned Stephen to the chair, then dropped himself upon a homemade bench sitting against the wall. Keeping down his distaste, Stephen stated his business as briefly as possible, producing his several deeds. The lawyer took them in his black-nailed hand and studied them carefully, agreeing to register the deeds in the Land Office. Stephen described the squatter's situation on his farm, amusedly sketching in what Elk had told him was the law about the owner having to "buy the improvement rights" before he could legally claim his own deeded property.

"That's right," the lawyer said, looking keenly at Stephen. "That seems reasonable and fair, doesn't it?"

"According to Western standards, I suppose," Stephen said grudgingly.

The lawyer snapped up the phrase with dry humor. "Western standards? Are there directions and locations to right and wrong? I guess I hadn't heard about those."

Stephen dismissed this witticism with a brush of his hand like old Horace used to make when he was impatient.

"Maybe you're right," the lawyer said ruminatively. "Maybe we *do* have a different set of laws out here."

He got up from the bench now and dug his big knuckly hands in his breeches pockets and strode up and down the small room, making the whole place more hideous by his activity.

"Perhaps we stick closer to the Golden Rule than some of the brokers and bankers have done in the East, from what I've heard lately."

Then he stopped his pacing and looked down at Stephen with great kindness in his rough young face.

"Mr. Phelps," he said, "something has seen fit to provide you with land which has already had some manners taught to it. You won't know what that means until you have had to break your back trying to hack your plow through some of our prairie grass. Be that as it may, you have been saved the hardest two years of your living out here. Another man has served those years for you . . . and you ought to be proud to pay him . . . as much as any money ever *could* pay him. . . ."

Stephen was upon his own feet now, glaring eye to eye at this impudent ignoramus. "I didn't come here to be preached at and insulted," he said stiffly. "If you've any legal service to offer . . . otherwise. . . ."

The big black-haired man burst out laughing then, and roughly he clapped Stephen on the shoulder. "I'll have to ask your pardon," he said. "They tell me I'll never make a good lawyer until I learn to oil my tongue a little smoother. I didn't intend any harm. Mr. Phelps . . . I got carried away, remembering what it means to wrestle with the raw ground for the first time."

They both sat down then, and unexpectedly each grinned at the other. "These are rough rascals," Stephen said to himself, "but there's something mighty likable about them. They snarl at you, and then they give you a bear hug. . . . I wouldn't be surprised if I'd end up liking this terrible country after all."

Stephen looked with almost boyish timidity over at the other man. His smoky dark eyes had a deep glow kindled, and his young craggy face had lines already set in it, as if convictions were deeply carved in his character. Stephen took out his linen handkerchief and wiped his brow, and the attorney dug around in his own pocket and finally produced a grimy red rag and did the same.

"Well," he said when that was finished, "now we'll get down to business like men who understand each other."

It didn't take very long after all, to analyze the matter and draw up a simple form which might be agreed upon by both Adams and Stephen. Indeed, there was a certain originality in this bumpkin of a lawyer, for he hit upon a way of regarding the matter that sent Stephen down the wooden stairs from his office, feeling better and richer than he had felt since he got into this Western mess.

He was so pleased with the way the ridiculous conference had gone that he decided to hurry up and transact his other errands . . . putting his very slim funds into the bank, arranging for their freight which would be arriving sometime within the next two months . . . so that he could make the late afternoon stage straight through to Joel Adams' house that very night and get the matter finished.

As he hurried out of the courtroom building, he glanced up at the sign over the door.

"Stuart and Lincoln, Attorneys and Counsellors at Law," the sign said.

The dignified words on the crude homemade-looking sign suddenly depressed him. What a contrast that bare, shabby dirty-windowed room was to the correctly luxurious offices of Benjamin Van Dyke . . . and what a contrast those men were, the one so courtly and genteel and scholarly, the other such a simple-minded oaf, with nothing but folk shrewdness and a kind of Biblical solemnity about him.

"But what else could you expect ever to rise up out of Illinois mud?" he asked himself despairingly.

And yet . . . that big scarecrow *had* thought of a quite ingenious way of presenting the whole dilemma, so that Stephen could write a cheerful letter home to Philadelphia after all. Without lying at all, he could put a pretty good face on the thing. He would write it to the lawyer Van Dyke and ask him to convey news and greetings to the Phelps family.

As he rode along in the crowded stage, he amused himself composing the letter. He would write wittily about his visit to the country lawyer in order to have his deeds properly registered, etc. He would describe the whole thing in a light-hearted, gay rhetoric. Matter of fact, if he did the thing cleverly enough, he might enlarge it to become a humorous essay for one of the literary monthlies, like the *North American Review*, or *Knickerbocker Magazine*. It would be a strange thing, wouldn't it, if this mud-mannered bumpkin should find himself immortalized in literature because an educated Philadelphian had chosen to write wittily about him!

Down at the end of the letter he would include a paragraph that said something like this: "Today I was able to hire a very competent farmer to live on our property and begin developing my plans for it."

That was certainly the way to consider the man. All that nonsense about buying what he had done . . . his crude little house and the broken fields! The right way to look at it was the way that shrewd Lincoln, who was probably a farmer himself, had finally presented it.

They would give Adams an opportunity to buy a few acres for himself. Certainly Stephen was going to need to employ some labor, and at the moment he had no money for that. . . . But there need be no embarrassment about it; the fellow could simply work out the purchase price of the land, and

then Stephen would generously give him another acre or two for the improvements.

The Phelps would have what they always had had, some hired help for their farm (however inadequate and ludicrous the "help" might seem according to Pennsylvania standards!) and the poor preacher wouldn't have to take to the road again as he had before he so fortuitously "located" on Stephen's land. Eventually he would own his simple little house, and Stephen would have had the use of his muscles and sweat.

It would be a good trade for both of them. He felt almost an affection for Adams, now that he had found this way of establishing their proper relationship to each other. He would help the poor chap all he could. He was probably starved for books and for some glimpse of civilized living. He felt downright fond of him now, as the stage thundered along toward his house.

It was so ineffably good to feel again in himself the affluence of benevolence and fondness, replacing the poverty of uncertainty and fear. After all, he had been educated to consider the welfare of the underprivileged, and it made his very soul cringe with shame when he was not in a position to do that. He *had* to feel beneficent toward less fortunate men, but in order to help the lowly, he had to be established in himself as a man superior in position and opportunity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Neighbors began gathering almost at dawn for the Phelps raising. Some came merely because nobody could afford to miss any doin's which might be called social diversion. The very poor families in farm wagons and the bachelors on horseback who were used to fixin' for themselves came because here would be food in abundance. All the food that anybody could eat, provided like extravagant boasts by farm women who poured all their dammed-up yearning for richness and luxuriance into their offerings. From miles around, women would bring big skillets and iron kettles full of their masterpieces. They would offer them deprecatingly, saying, "Well, here it is . . . my ole prairie chicken noodle soup some people like . . . ain't even as good as usual. But here it is, a pore make-out, I'm afeerd." There would be peach pies that made your juices run just to imagine the taste, and blackeyed peas baked with pork, and Miz James's famous chicken and dumplin's, and Miz Larrup's apple pandowdy with brandy . . . there'd be every voluptuous viand that neighborly competitiveness could call forth.

Other families came to help because no matter how much work they did for newcomers, they felt they never could quite pay up the debt which they themselves had incurred when first they came to this country. They didn't say much about it; eloquence was not something of the word, but of tools and tiredness and cheerful dogged effort throughout the day.

Some came out of curiosity to see if any of the highfalutin' things they had heard about the Phelps could possibly be true. Could it be true, for instance, that Mrs. Phelps wore four petticoats under her dress, and that these petticoats frothed at the hems with lace which her husband had had imported for her from France? People who had stopped in at the Larsens' on washday (quite by accident, of course) reported extravagantly about what they had seen hanging on the bushes and fluttering from the fences among the staunch, square, earthy-looking underwear of the Larsen children and

Opal. Imagination ran riot; descriptions spread in concentric billows around the truth, like the rings around a stone dropped in a pool. Many a farm woman ironing her own crude ruffles had avidly tried to picture what those petticoats and nightdresses and underdrawers would be like. Why, Opal Larsen had told somebody the nightdresses were so gauzy you could sift corn flour through 'em. Furthermore, she said that Mrs. Phelps didn't own a thing that didn't have little pink rosebuds embroidered on it somewhere! Like as if her initials weren't letters at all, but were little pink rosebuds!

Mrs. Phelps had given Opal a nightdress for her own, and Opal said that if Elk would let her, she was going to be laid out in it when the time come. It was more like a weddin' dress than something a body would just sleep in. Even sleep was probably fancier for people like the Phelpses than it was for common everyday people.

Well, now they were going to see these things with their own eyes. For when you are building a house for somebody, there are few secrets that can be kept.

Besides all these reasons for coming to the raisin', there was one other glittering feature of the day that would go down in county history. Nobody that could git there would be caught dead stayin' away!

It had been Elk's idea. Stephen had protested when Elk had first explained that the neighbors were willing to give him and Amoret a house-raising. "Why, these people are strangers to me."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I can't let them do this, unless I'm able to pay them," Stephen had stammered uneasily. "And at the moment, that is . . . well, it's inconvenient."

"I don't know rightly as you *could* hire 'em to do it," Elk said thoughtfully after a minute. "Some of us neighbors is proud people, Mr. Phelps."

"But I'm not sure I could accept it . . . except from friends. And I've done nothing that would warrant these people considering themselves my friends."

"Well, you could say we might be offerin' you our friendship, on account," Elk drawled. "A kind of advance payment on the future, so to speak." He cocked his eye quizzically at the younger man. "You're aimin' to be friends with us, ain't you?"

"Of course," he said, almost embarrassed, "if you people want us for friends."

"Well, then . . . But there is one thing you could do. . . ."

"What's that?"

You could maybe offer up a kind of a prize. I have heard of people doin' that, sometimes. We could have a kind of competition for who does the most work."

"Yes, we could do that," Stephen said, brightening. "We could make a sporting event of the day, couldn't we?"

"But in some ways that ain't exactly fair," Elk said. "There's some people is just *able* to do the most work. Fact is, if we did that, I'd likely win the prize, and I don't think that would be fair. You bein' a kind of a boarder of mine, and likea that."

Tom said, "Maybe we could have a raffle, pa. I've heerd of people havin' a rafflin' off."

"Yes, that could be," his father said. "That might add right smart interest to the day."

"And what could I give?" Stephen asked. "Some money? A money prize?"

"No, I don't think a money prize would be so very appropriate," Elk said, and he stopped. Every person in the room saw what he was thinking. "Now if you had some kind of a little ornament, say . . . some kind of a piece of jewelry, or something . . ." he said, shifting his eyes guiltily.

"Something, for instance, like a watch, I suppose," said Opal with disgusted sarcasm. "Or wouldn't you have thought of that by yourself? Elk Larsen, I'm ashamed of you."

"It wasn't me that said it," he grumbled.

"I really am ashamed of you," she repeated scathingly.

"Well, a man can't help what he admires," Elk said, brazening it out, "and I think, myself, I'm being mighty generous about it. I could have proposed that Mr. Phelps give the prize for the man that done the most work, and then I could have busted my hide gittin' the most work done. You gotta say that for me, Opal."

"Yes, I hafta say that for you," she said, her face flaming with shame.

Stephen said, "You mean you think I ought to put up . . . my watch?"

"It isn't a question of oughtin' to do somethin'," Elk said

robustly, "it's just your own choice, Mr. Phelps. If you happen to feel like givin' up somethin' like a watch in order to git your house built, why that would be your own business."

Stephen said hesitantly, "I have a very fine scarab ring. It's quite rare. Interesting to look at, too."

"I don't know as a ring would be so well received," Elk said quickly. "A ring ain't a very useful thing for them that has to dig their life right up out of the ground with their own two hands. But a *watch* now . . . a watch is something anybody could use. Why, you could hang a watch up on a hook on the wall so everybody could see it, and when you were discouraged, you could look at it and git heartened up. And if you had it in your pocket out in the field, you could take it out, and it would tell you when to come in for your dinner."

"As if your stummick didn't tell you that!" Opal said disgustedly.

"You'd know to the exact second what time it was, all the time," he said lamely.

"As if it would do you any good to know! All you need to know is that time goes on and you got something you ought to be doin' every minute of it."

But Stephen put a stop to this now. "The watch is the right thing to give," he said decisively. "I'd probably have thought of it by myself, Mr. Larsen," he added graciously.

Elk's face brightened, then his honesty asserted itself. "It's nice of you to say that, Mr. Phelps," he said, staring bashfully at the puncheon floor. "But I guess we all know you wouldn't of. I guess I just let my wantin' git to running away with me."

Then Stephen outdid himself in generosity. "How would it be if I made *you* a present of the watch," he said, "and found something else to give to the neighbors?"

"I couldn't accept that, Mr. Phelps," Elk said with quick dignity. "I wouldn't pleasure myself one bit with the watch, much as I'd admire to have it for myself. Because I'd know every time I looked at it that I'd hinted for it something shameful, and it would roon the gift for me. It purely would."

"But I'd like to make you a gift," Stephen said. "I don't know how to tell you, but I appreciate what you people have done for us more than I can ever repay. . . ."

"It ain't a thing you wouldn't a done for us," Elk said almost angrily. "Seems to me I have to tell you people that two

or three times a week. Besides, we've enjoyed having you. It's done Opal and the young'uns a power of good to have somebody here in the house with 'em." Then he peeled off the last rind of his reticence and said, "And to tell you the truth, it's done me good, too. A man like me gits so he thinks he's the one who knows everything in the world until he brushes against somebody like you, Mr. Phelps. If we helped you out any, why, you've helped us too. Things kind of even themselves up in this world. I noticed that."

"Well, it's settled then," Stephen said. "We'll offer the watch to be raffled off."

"That's about the finest thing that ever happened in this here county. It's going to make that day something nobody out here is ever going to fergit."

Amoret, wearing one of Opal's big brown calico aprons while she worked at the sideboard cleaning sour dock for greens, listened to this whole conversation with wonder and gratitude. She never could have believed that the old Stephen, proud, arrogant, and impatient, could become this man sitting wearily in the crude room, with his fingernails already broken and discolored by farm work, speaking as he was speaking. The moment formed a good man, and you could count upon it. That was part of God's creating. God formed the moment, and the moment formed the man.

He had not even let Elk guess what this watch meant to him. More than any mere timepiece. It had been his father's graduation gift to him. Much else that was intrinsically more valuable, he had allowed to be sacrificed in the collapse. But he had kept the watch, because Tobias had given it to him. Engraved within its heavy case was one of Tobias' rare expressions of affection. The inscription was too big yet for Stephen.

To Stephen—

the best for my son

the best from my son.

The first "best" was the father's pledge, and that . . . unless you could judge with that invisible eye which old Benjamin Van Dyke recommended . . . was a pledge which had been broken. "The best from my son." That was an expectation and a prayer. And nobody could yet say what would happen to that.

This moment, Amoret knew with her eyes closed against tears, would have pleased Tobias. His son was giving away the watch, but by giving away the watch he was keeping faith with the inscription. For nothing "better," from Tobias' own way of looking at things, had ever yet come "from" his son. Perhaps the father's expectation would not be too big, after all.

So now on that bright morning, all the neighbors had gathered for the raising. Besides their labor, each family had brought a house gift. These ranged from some cherished knick-knack down to a "cutting" from a dooryard plant, if this was all the very poorest families could spare. Some of these cuttings were beloved refugees from "home" . . . a little evergreen tree from Rhode Island, a shoot from a lilac bush that once had stood beside a green-shuttered, white-painted house in Salem, Massachusetts. They had been carried years before over the long hard trek westward; they had been nursed through the cruel Illinois winters, and the blistering dust-grinding summers, but they had survived. And never did a tired, homesick eye rest upon them without feeling, at least for a fugitive moment, at home.

"When you live on the prairie as long as I have, Mrs. Phelps," said the stringy-looking little woman who gave the lilac, "you'll find yourself pleased more and more by the sight of something green that gits itself up above the earth. Seems like Illinois ground holds everything down as close to itself as it can. But this here's a brave bush that will rear itself up against the sky if you've got patience enough to wait for it."

"I have patience enough," Amoret said. "I'll plant it right beside the well where I can take good care of it."

One family was so poor that it could bring only a supply of goose-quill pens. "Heerd you and Mr. Phelps are educated people," they said humbly as they offered these. "We'uns ain't never had any use for a pen in our house."

One old woman gave up her shallow iron flat-bottomed pan with a tight cover for baking. "People in the East swear by an oven," she said defensively, "but I always say if you've got a good skellet, you can bake anything." To it she added a little poke of sulphur. "For the mange," she said laconically. "'Course you people may be too stylish to have the mange, but most of the new settlers out here gets it sooner or later."

Others brought scraps of material from their pitiful clothes for the quilt the women would "piece" today. Several gave up pillow cases filled with wild-goose down, laboriously saved to make a feather bed.

"A feather bed'll make almost any man and his wife nice and sociable to each other," a giver said solemnly to Amoret.

The men, big, rough, and generous, brought homemade tools. The giver of a white birch axe-helve showed on his forefinger how perfectly it was balanced. There was a grub-hoe and an ox-yoke, a scythe that needed only to be "shined good and sharpened while you're easing yourself by the fire this winter, sir." There were live gifts, also, a couple of hens, several young pigs, and even a tame rabbit.

Some of the gifts were more alarming than valuable. There was, for instance, the rattlesnake stone which one old woman brought. "If you ever have a baby," she said cheerfully, "and a rattlesnake should bite your baby, all you got to do is soak this stone in some bear oil, then let it rest in some milk for an hour. Then you feed the milk to the baby, and it'll take the poison right out of him."

"Thank you, Mrs. James," Amoret said, trying not to shrink back. "It's a good thing to have. I just hope we'll never have to use it."

"Once I seen it work *good*," she said. Then added honestly, "Once I seen it when it didn't work. But that was because it was the dark of the moon."

There was a buckeye, too, to be carried in Stephen's hip pocket to keep him from getting rheumatism.

Several gifts were offered slyly to Stephen when the women were looking the other way, little stone jugs of likker with stoppers made of a piece of corncob.

"I don't know whether or not you're above using a little Bug Juice, Mr. Phelps. But there'll come a rainy day when you'll be glad you got it to whittle down your insides a little."

"There'll probably be plenty of days when I'll need my insides whittled down," Stephen said grimly, shaking hands with the donor. "Thank you very much, sir."

The woods, which were usually so quiet, rang and echoed now with excitement and laughter and the blows of the axes. Joel Adams had put up a hitching rail between two posts and by eight o'clock the assembled wagons and teams gave the place the look of a camp meeting or a fair.

Stephen and Joel Adams had selected as the site for the house the knoll having the most beautiful crown above the river. With their grubbing hooks and hatchets, they had cleared off the hazel brush and briars in a wide circle, and Joel had cut down the necessary trees, mostly stalwart walnuts. These slim giants, sawed to proper lengths, and faced smoothly with an adz so that there would be no bark to chip off, nor any underlayer of soft wood to decay, would rise by nighttime to be walls and roof.

The forest, always a cool surprise to these people who spent most of their hours on the unprotected open plains, was a maze of tender light and shifting shadow, fresh and fragrant. All the sunlight in the sky seemed to be pouring down in golden blessing on the cleared space where the house was to stand. It was lighted like a little stage, as if the very angels in heaven were having a charade.

"I just ain't never seen a purtier place for a house," people kept saying throughout the day. "And as if that ain't enough, you got Joel Adams living two whoops and a holler away from you! You sure are the luckiest people."

In the center of the knoll a post was put up with Stephen's gold watch hanging upon it. All day it winked and twinkled in the sunlight like a vigilant eye. As each man had arrived in the morning, he chose a slip from those on which Joel Adams had carefully printed numbers, and solemnly dropped one half of his ticket into a small firkin standing beside the post.

"And don't lose the other end of your ticket . . . you'll have to prove we've drawed your number fair and square," they told each other. A tight lid was nailed on the firkin when all the numbers were within, so that nobody . . . not wind nor devil, nor covetous man himself . . . could tamper with the slips before the drawing at sundown.

Throughout the day there sprang up a lively exchange in lottery tickets. Lem James said he didn't want no watch nohow, and he would sell his ticket for a fip and a bit, and a jug of Satan's Cider. He didn't literally mean a fip and a bit, however, for when Elk, tortured all morning by the temptation, got to haggling with him about it, Lem upped his price to six bits.

"I'm a fool to buy this chance offen you. You never was a hand to win anything, Lem James." But Elk put down his

seventy-five cents on the firkin head, and everyone witnessed the transaction, in case any trouble arose about it later.

"I'm a fool, pure and simple," Elk said, pocketing Lem's number nine ticket. "But I'd just about bust myself wide open with pleasure was I to git that watch."

By late morning, the logs were ready for the actual raising, piled in four heaps, the end-logs north and south, and the longer side-logs, east and west. Elk, who was, even according to his own admission, the strongest man in the county, was to act as one cornerman. Joel Adams was to serve as the other. The rest divided roughly into two groups, Elk's gang taking over the north and west sides, and Joel Adams' men the front and south end of the building.

"All right now, gentlemen," Joel Adams called out. "Roll up the two first sidars and git 'em into place." Astride the log, the cornermen dressed up the corners, sheering off each end expertly with their adz. Their top wedges stood up pretty and sharp, and the end wedges were notched to lock the corners. Within this frame a firmly fitted foundation was laid, over which the puncheon floor would later be nailed. Elk himself walked around and, with critical expertness, made certain that the foundation would endure through summer and winter.

"That'll stand as long as the Phelps family stands," he pronounced solemnly.

Now each log for the walls was notched underneath and sharpened to a wedge on its upper side, so that each would fit like a saddle over the one below it. The men lifted each log, then, and fitted it down securely and spat upon their hands in satisfaction as the cornermen tested its stability.

"Shove her home," Elk would call out lustily. "Solid as a tooth astride a jawbone . . . and then some."

"Tight as a bung in a preacher's barrel," Lem called out. "Not meanin' no offense to you, Mr. Adams."

"Not taking any offense, either, Lem," Joel Adams said. "Fact is, it would hurt my feelings sore if you thought I was just a preacher."

"No danger of that," Lem said. "My ole woman says you're everything any other man is, and then a preacher besides."

The chips flew now as notches and saddle-seats were cut into each log. As each was fitted, it gave that small scream of wood crunching on wood which meant that it was tight as

human hands could make it. When the wall became too high for the men to manage the heavy timbers without an inclined plane, skids were hoisted upon the wall, and the logs were rolled up into position.

"Heave there, gentlemen . . . git your guts into it," Elk would grunt. The men strained and spat and cursed good-naturedly, not sparing an ounce of their effort, while the wall grew taller, timber by timber, until now it was higher than they could manage with their bare strength. Then it was necessary to push up each timber with poles, crotched to grip the log and keep it from crashing down and mashing somebody's foot, as had happened at the Tirper raising last year.

Elk was very proud of his skill as cornerman. But today there was a cloud across his vanity, for Joel Adams did not squat and hack at his work as did most cornermen. He stood up straight, balanced and lithe as if he were on solid ground. After a terrible moment when Elk realized this was Adams' way, he himself scrambled upright on his own corner, his brogans slipping and scuffling until he caught his balance.

"You'll fall off'n there, as sure as you're a minute old, Elk Larsen," Lem shouted at him. "You ain't a young'un still, you know."

His fierce competitiveness held him aloft. His white hair shone above his almost earth-dark face; his thick body seemed screwed like a peg into the very air as if nothing could dislodge it. He looked like a squat clothespin perched grimly. He glared over at Joel Adams, whom he admired more than any man in the county, and fondly imagined that was exactly how he himself looked. He wished somebody would call Opal over to see them . . . Joel's broad shoulders were strong and quick and his tapered waist was as supple as a girl's. He poised, light as a cat, with his magnificent long legs spread wide as he swung his axe. His tame bluejay, that he had rescued from the very gullet of a snake this spring, kept flying and darting around him, screaming with mad joy, because the two of them were in the air now.

"That there bird of Mr. Adams' thinks maybe he's taught the preacher to fly . . ." little Joey Larsen cried.

"Takes a child to tell you what a bird is a-thinkin'," Opal said.

The women looked over to see the bird, then called others to admire Elk. They pretended decorously that it *was* Elk

they were looking at, for he was a respectably married man. Indeed the two of them, the young earnest giant, and his old stubborn admirer, imitating him bravely, were a sight which was handsome to see.

"And don't Elk know it, too!" Opal said disparagingly, as the other women squinted up at her man. But her face was pink with pride in spite of herself.

"'Course I don't mean Mr. Adams . . . he don't know nothin' about showin' off to women," she said. "But give any of the rest of 'em a chance to stand up head and shoulders above each other, and they'll git dizzy-drunk just outdoin' themselves."

One old crone removed her corncob pipe from her mouth and laughed lasciviously. "Head and shoulders? Why, any man that could do what Mr. Adams does is always toenails, tail, and teeth above the rest of 'em. Includin' Elk Larsen. And you know it, Opal."

"Git 'em down from there," Opal said. "Call 'em to the dinner, afore my man falls off'n there and breaks himself. My lands, I've got to speak to Mr. Adams . . . he wouldn't want to make a widder woman outen me, now would he?"

(2)

After the huge midday meal had been cleaned up, the women went back to their work, and the children, stuffed like little pigs, threw themselves down under the mulberry and red haw trees and went to sleep. This was a day to remember throughout the long weeks ahead when each family would live their days alone, as so much of the backwoods life had to be lived. They would dwell again in every hour of this wonderful time together, so now they must fill it as full as they possibly could with companionship and accomplishment. Before the day was done, a piece-work quilt would be finished and presented to Amoret. Each woman would put some little identification of her own into the square which she had made. Those who could write would boastfully cross-stitch their initials in; the others, too proud to admit they could not write, would embroider in some little symbol which they declared they always used to mark their handiwork, a tiny primitive church, two little stars, a circle inside a square.

"Of course, this probably ain't as nice as you're used to, Mrs. Phelps," they said as they sewed, looking at Amoret with shy malicious eyes, hoping that she would deny it and would tell them something about the fabulous old life of which she seldom spoke.

"Oh, indeed, this is going to be much more beautiful than I'm used to," Amoret said generously. "This will be something nobody could buy in any fine Philadelphia store."

"You reckon that's true?" they said delightedly. "My, my, Mrs. Phelps."

"I shall write home and tell my sisters-in-law all about it, as soon as I've time," Amoret said.

The women couldn't help loving Amoret. "Even if she is so pretty, she just fergits about herself and gits down to work," they said to each other.

Opal couldn't do enough for her. "I love her as good as if she was my own sister," Opal said. "She'll take aholt and try anything. She baked a right nice pie yestiddy. Not quite as good as my Emily kin bake, but mercy! Emily's been bakin' sence she was nine."

Emily, in fact, was going to come over and live with Mrs. Phelps as soon as they got a place ready for her to sleep.

"That-a-way Mrs. Phelps won't feel shamed about not knowing how to do things, the way she would afore a full-growed woman in her house," Opal explained. "Besides, I don't know where we'd find a full-growed woman to spare around here. Especially when Mr. Phelps don't seem able to pay much wages or anything."

Some of the women were making a fancy bedspread of diaper cloth to throw over the new bed which Stephen had had sent out from Springfield.

"Next time we gither, Mrs. Phelps, we'll be cutting this up proper into squares, the way it was meant to be cut," one of them said mischievously to Amoret.

"I hope so, Mrs. James," Amoret smiled unexpectedly.

"You spend the winter in the wilderness, and you'll do more than hope so," the old woman laughed raucously. "Nothing brings out babies like a winter in the woods."

Some of the demure matrons looked properly shocked at this, but others rocked on their skinny haunches with ribald mirth. "Ain't no use makin' believe you don't know what she's

talkin' about," they said, poking each other in the ribs. "I guess there ain't a one of us here that ain't had experience."

By late afternoon the walls of the house were ten feet above the ground. The windows had been only roughed in, for the finer work was supposed to be done on a later and more leisurely day by the man of the house. The windows and the fireplace, and the inside paneling of the walls, if a man wished to aspire to these, were the master's own signature on his home. Just as the curtains and rugs, the candles and the soap were the grace notes which a woman brought to the abode.

There was some good-natured conjecture about what Stephen would be able to accomplish in the fixin' of his house. Some said he didn't have it in him to do a thing. He'd have to hire Joel Adams to make it up for him. Nobody more helpless than an educated man, they said tartly to each other. 'Course, maybe he could learn, but meantime the winter wasn't goin' to wait on him learnin'. The wind would git to pokin' around the windows afore many weeks.

"But you cain't say he's not trying today," one defender said.

"Tryin's a long way from doin'. Look't him over there now. He's goin' a cut off his foot if he don't pay attention to that axe."

But even though they laughed at him behind his back, they secretly liked him. About all a man had to do to win their liking was to try hard in order to do a job badly which they themselves did well. Now if he ever got to doing it better than they. . . . But Stephen at the moment looked in no danger of that.

The work was drawing to a close, and the best part of the day would soon begin. For now that the house was roughly built, it must be "warmed" by dancing and laughter and neighborliness far into the night. There was much ceremony to the christening of a new home. Nobody could set foot into it once the roof was on, until the owners themselves had gone in to pronounce a house-blessing. A house must be blest, first with solemnity and then with festivity, for these were the three parts that made up the life out here . . . work, and solemnness, and then a sharp noisy edge of rough fun.

"A lot of people are right superstitious about a house," the women explained to Amoret. "Of course, you *kin* live happy

in a house that ain't been properly blessed. But you got a much better chance if you do everything right to start with."

"Mama always said the three first things that ought to be taken into a new house is a holy picture, a pinch of salt, and a cup of yeast," Opal said.

"Some people think the first thing that ought to go into a house is a spark of fire for the hearth. Others set store by some nice healing yarbs," Mrs. James said, with her usual practicalness.

"I've seen women who lived in a house that had the bed moved in first, that ain't had a year of their life without some young'un bein' born," Mrs. Nat Burden contributed.

It was almost sunset when the last rough puncheon board had been sheltered by the last-nailed-down slat of the roof. The big supper was ready, and everyone was ready for it. But before they could sit down, they must let the husband and wife of the new house go into it alone and bless it. So the rest of them went a hundred yards away and stood waiting solemnly.

Stephen, who usually could enter into any occasion with histrionism, was embarrassed and sulky and white-faced. It had been a difficult day for him, and he wanted only to be somewhere else. He wanted only to sink into some silence where nothing would be expected of him. But he tried not to disappoint these simple people whose day of generosity he had been forced to accept.

He put his arm around his wife and walked across the cleared space with her, across their crude new threshold, and into the house. The new floor of the cabin was gold in the late light; chips and curls and sawdust lay about; the uneven ragged holes where the windows would be, looked out into the woods. It was all he could do to keep back tears of shame and despair. Crude and homely as all this was, it was better than he could have given Amoret without the help of these people with whom he had so little in common. Yet for this humiliation and shame, they were asking him to be gracious and grateful! They were asking him to look beyond the ugliness into some dimension of beauty which he could not and did not want to acknowledge. Yet here was Amoret with a radiant face. Her golden head was bent over whatever symbol it was she had brought into this hideous little box of a place, to humor the superstition of these ignorant yokels. She was

managing by some childlike grace of spirit to transform this mocking moment into something apart from despair and terror. He could not do it for her, God knows. But she had been able to do it for herself. Well, for this at least he *could* be grateful.

"I've brought in Tobias' Bible," she said, looking up at him with glowing innocence in her eyes. "I wanted it to be the first thing that came into our home, Stephen."

The old whip of fury lashed through him, but for the first time since the book had come between them, he stifled his anger. If this ignorant nonsense somehow pleased her, he must try not to spoil it. He controlled himself with an effort. Her face was so brimming with beauty . . . and more than beauty . . . that he forgot everything else for a few seconds.

"This is what I've brought," he said, and took her into his arms and bent his face above hers and gave her a long tender kiss. "All I have left, Amoret . . . it's all I could bring anywhere."

"It's all I'll ever need," she said, and meant it with her whole heart. They stood as they were a few seconds, enshrouded by the warm wings of their kiss. "It is the best house-blessing any woman ever could ask for her home," she said after a long moment. She looked around for somewhere to lay the book. There was only a rough little stool to put it on, for no furniture had yet come into the house.

She ran to the door then and called out to the others:

"Come see our beautiful home, you people."

They came running up the slope, clucking with admiration as if they themselves had not put together this rustic miracle.

Amoret said with shy formality, "Before I welcome you inside my house, I want to thank you all because you have given us such a home. And I want to thank God because he has given us such friends." She held out her hands to them, and they filed past and shook her hand and spoke in shy mumbles.

After they had all approved everything and had given their unsolicited opinions over and over, they moved in the bedstead which had been leaning against a tree and made it up quickly. For as soon as supper was over, there would be plenty of children to be tucked into it to sleep while the dance went on. The bed stood alone, against one wall, but it was, indeed, the beginning of a household.

Before they left for supper someone asked Joel Adams if he would offer up a prayer.

"I will gladly," he said, "unless Mr. Phelps himself would like to say it, since this is to be his home."

"Yes, that's proper," they cried, and all turned and looked expectantly at Stephen. For a moment he thought he would burst angrily from the group and run away . . . anywhere . . . anywhere away from all this stifling unction. Thanking God for poverty and hardship . . . making something out of nothing. . . .

Then Amoret was beside him, slipping her arm quickly around his waist.

"We'll both say it," she said. "We'll offer it together. The way we're going to do everything in this house, Stephen."

They all bent their heads, and after a moment Amoret's clear little voice said, "We thank Thee, God, for bringing us here. And for building this house. We promise to live in it as Thy children. Amen."

They all said "Amen" then, and after a tiny second of confirming stillness, they broke away and ran down the slope to where the tables were laid. They ran like children, two and two, with their young'uns pelting after them.

Then somebody pounded on the table and cried, "Now we'll have the drawin'. Before we eat. So the lucky man can look at his own watch while he's fillin' himself with victuals."

They lifted the firkin up to the middle of the table, and gathered around, and anybody who knew how made a lucky sign on his fingers or spat over his left shoulder. They pried off the top of the firkin and shook up the slips on which Joel Adams had written the numbers before this day started.

"Miz Phelps ought to do the drawin'," they said. "She's the reasonable one to do it, no mistake." They blindfolded her with Stephen's linen handkerchief and put her hand into the open firkin and she brought out a number. Joel Adams read it off, after a breathless silence.

"It's number nine. . . ." he said. "Nine . . . who has number nine?" There was a tense moment, and then everyone broke out in a cheer.

"It's Elk! It shore *is* Elk," they cried. "He bought the number fair and square. I seen him do it with my own eyes."

"It's my number," Lem cried in an envious croak. "He got it off'n me. He had no right to persuade me to sell it."

"You hesh your mouth," Mrs. James said. "I seen you sell it myself. This ought to teach you a lesson. You'd give up anything for six bits."

Elk could barely believe his ears. His big rough hand was trembling with incredulous ecstasy as he reached out to take the watch.

"I 'clare I never won nothin' in my life," he said in a whisper. "Ef I got this it's purely because the good Lord Himself mixed His finger into it. I ain't prayed for nothin' sence I was a little shaver, but so help me, I certain'y did pray for that watch."

"It's yourn," they said. "You got it, Elk, fair and square. I'm as pleased to have you have it, as if it was me."

But hardly had the watch gone into his hands, and hardly had he held it up before his gaping eyes to look at it, as if it somehow had become in that instant even more beautiful because now it belonged to him, than a noise broke out on the edge of the crowd.

"Mr. Adams . . . would you mind lookin' again at that number you got in your hand?" Nat Burden called out. "Are you sure that is a nine there?"

Joel was still holding the little paper in his hand. "Why, of course it's a nine," he said.

"Turn it the other way around. It looks to me like it's a six," Nat cried with a victorious whoop.

Mrs. Burden was screeching, "If it's a six, it belongs to Nat over here. He's got a card, turn it one way it looks like a nine . . . turn it the other way and . . ."

Nat Burden was boring his way through the crowd, guffawing and protesting at the same time. "I swan, when I took that number this mornin' I thought to myself, 'I really got myself two chances in one. You could make this either a six or a nine . . . the way Joel Adams has wrote the number out.' That's what I thought to myself."

Everyone broke into the clamor now. At first it had seemed Nat was only making a joke, then it developed that he really meant it. . . . Nat Burden was going to press a claim! Some of the neighbors thought that was right, and others said that if he did they'd never speak to him again. You could always count on the Burdens, some people muttered, to stir up some kind of a rumpus. It beat all. It wasn't so much that he was plain mean; lots of people were mean. But Nat Burden jest reveled in his meanness. And his woman was just like him.

The noise and tumult went on until finally Stephen himself had to step in and arbitrate. He searched around in the firkin until he found the other paper which had written upon it the controversial number, and they held up the two and compared them.

Joel Adams was utterly contrite about the unfortunate thing. "It's my fault . . . I had no business to print the numbers out the way I did . . . I've just never mastered a proper handwritin'," he said helplessly. "I learned myself to write from studying the printed page."

Everyone was crowding around and comparing the two slips of paper.

"Turn 'em one way, and they're both sixes, turn 'em the other and they're both nines," they cried in consternation. "It's certain'y a most unlucky thing."

"Well, it 'pears perfectly simple to me," Nat Burden belowed above the din. "I'm the only one rightly and legally owns the drawed paper. Nobody denies that . . . mine was *give* to me in the regular way. But Elk here *bought* his. I don't think that would stand in a fair trial. . . ."

"He's made a good point," someone said. "I hate to see Nat Burden do Elk outen the watch, him settin' his heart on it the way he has . . . but I dunno. . . ."

Then Elk himself, flaming-faced and angry, strode into the midst, with the coveted watch dangling from his clenched fist.

"Here . . . take the watch, Nat Burden," he shouted. "This was supposed to be a friendly fair prizel Ef there's goin' to be any fightin' and howlin' over it, I don't want it. Nothin' could make me take it. . . ." He was almost sobbing now with anger and disappointment. He was waving the watch under Nat Burden's eyes, and Nat was backing away, pop-eyed and foolish-faced.

"Now . . . wait a minute, Elk . . . you don't have to blubber about it . . ."

"Who's blubberin'?" Elk roared. "Take this damned watch afore I break in your teeth with it. . . ."

Joel Adams reached out quickly and rescued the watch, but only a second before the white-haired man sent his fist crashing against the taunting but frightened face of Nat Burden. The crack rang out above the other noises, and then everything was utterly silent.

Not even Opal moved. In less-awful minute, she would

have rushed forward to admonish her impulsive husband, but this moment was so dangerous with desire and disappointment and rage, and with the terribleness of Elk losing his temper and smashing out with his fist . . . that she stood petrified. Only a whimper trickled out of her.

Nobody moved at all for a moment. Then it was Elk himself who spoke.

"I oughten a done that, Nat," he said sorrowfully. "Now I *will* have to let you have the watch."

He turned away, his dark face working with emotion. He scrubbed back his hair with his hand, and then brushed it across his eyes. For a moment he looked like what he was, a cruelly disappointed old man.

"Ef my boy, Tom, was to lose his temper like that in a sporting matter, I'd have to thrash him proper," he said painfully. "I'll let you thrash me, Mr. Adams, if you've a mind to."

"You've thrashed yourself, Elk," Joel Adams said. "And I think the fault is mostly mine."

Nobody knew what to do then. So Elk himself did something. He swung around and faced Nat and put out his hand.

"It shows you what kin happen to a man," he said in a choked kind of voice, "when he lets himself want somethin' too much. I reckon it's somethin' had to happen to me. . . ."

Nat said uncomfortably, "I'm mighty sorry about it, Elk. If you don't think I really won the watch. . . ."

"Even if you didn't win it in the drawin', you won it when I lost hold of myself," Elk said. "I'm purely ashamed." He hung his head, while the crowd began murmuring with sympathy and indignation. Then he looked up and grinned unsteadily. "Well, now, we'll fergit it . . . Let's set down, everybody . . . if Nat's watch here says it's time for supper. . . ."

(3)

Nat Burden had the watch, but it was Elk who had the sympathy of the whole neighborhood. Throughout supper Elk's face was glazed over with such a determined cheerfulness that nobody dared speak about the watch.

"I guess we're not going to be able to stay for the dance," Nat said when supper was cleaned up. "I got a few things to

take keer of at home. One of my cows . . . she's been giving me some trouble. . . ."

"I reckon that new watch of yours tells you it's time to go home," one of the women said sarcastically.

Nat and Mrs. Burden gathered their young'uns together and drove off, taking the watch away with them, but not the subject, by any means.

At last Stephen said peremptorily, "Let's don't have any more talk about it. The whole thing was unfortunate from start to finish. I wanted to give Mr. Larsen the watch in the first place, and that's what I should have done."

"You cain't tell. He may git it yet," one of the women said. "Out here on the prairie nothin's ever finished till everybody concerned is safe and buried. Elk may get the watch yet, some way. You mind what I say."

"I'll never get it now," Elk said morosely. "The way I figger, I done myself out of the watch. The Lord give it to me, and I done myself out of it by doin' my thinkin' with my fist."

Now it was time to come into the house for the dance.

"Afore we start the dancin', let's have some singin'," they cried. A black-bearded giant stood up in the middle of the floor with his accordion and sang in a loud whining voice, while the rest stamped out the melody with their feet and clapped it out with their hands.

*"There was a woman in our town
Last house afore the wood,
Who loved her husband dear-i-lee
But another man twicet as good."*

They had all heard this ditty dozens of times, yet they doubled up with mirth. The little house which had so lately been but a pile of logs, and then awhile before that, tall quiet trees standing alone on this knoll, rocked with shouts and laughter and the full-bodied liveliness of these people singing:

*"There was a couple in our town,
Cain't tell you what they done.
But the man was fearless
And the woman was keerless,
So they had a lot of fun."*

Lem James now stepped up and took charge of the room, rubbing his hands together like a magician.

"Git your partners, ladies and gentlemen," he called out. "We built this here house, and we're goin' to break it down if we kin."

The accordion, toothless-sounding and wheezy, and a fiddle, whining with gay self-pity, set up an argument and a bickering that shook the whole room. The neighbors whirled into the dance, their heavy shoes scuffing and thudding, and their hands clapping delightedly.

It was then that Amoret realized that Stephen was not in the house. She slipped away and followed the path of pale light which was spraying away from the door into the nudging darkness. She ran along quietly, led by instinct to the deepest shadow under a walnut tree, where Stephen lounged against the trunk, lost in his own thinking.

"Darling? What are you doing out here?" she whispered.

He looked down at her, and then he tossed up his head and laughed shortly. "I'm nursing my blisters," he said. "God built the house, but I've got the blisters."

Lugubriously, he showed her his poor battered hands. She lifted them both to her lips and kissed them as if he were a small boy whose mother could "make it well."

"My poor Stephen," she said. "You have had such a day. But how wonderful it has been . . . how really wonderful I'll never forget it."

"I'll never forget it either," he said grimly. She looked at him hesitantly, for this was one of the happiest moments of her life, and he was outside it. For an instant, she was prophetically saddened; it seemed as if Stephen never would be able to enter into what she was building. The wild boisterous life inside their house already seemed familiar and acceptable to her. But he stood outside it, loathing it with every instinct. He stood outside it as stubbornly as his body was standing now outside, alone and bruised.

She must find a way to bring him in. Whatever she had of loveliness or woman's skill . . . whatever she understood of this new faith in living which Tobias had helped her see . . . must be spent from now on toward bringing Stephen inside. Nothing else would matter ever to her, unless she could accomplish that. In a quick, wordless, unconventional rush, she asked for help. Perhaps some people would think it was irrev-

erent to ask for this kind of help, she thought in a shy rush of properness. But she asked anyway with all earnestness. And an answer came to her body and seemed to raise up her arm and lay it lightly along his shoulders in a waltz gesture. The answer came in her eyes, which beckoned to her husband with quick roguish laughter, in no way divine, yet explicitly efficacious.

One prayed, she thought swiftly, and one took whatever answer came, and if one had faith, the answer would be the very food craved by the hunger . . . the very deed for which the need was crying . . . She swung him merrily into a dance. "Come on, then, Mr. Phelps with the blistered palms! You might as well have blisters on your heels! The first dance is with your wife . . . your wife who is in love with you."

She expected to swing him toward the house, but instead he tightened his arm fiercely around her and danced her away from the open door. They whirled in the darkness, tripped a second and then, laughing wildly, they caught their footing again, dancing farther and farther from the house.

"You're running away with me."

"I'm kidnaping you." His eyes were wild and brilliant in the night, and his breath was coming fast in his throat. She could feel his blood lashed to high tide in his veins. The simple fiddle music, the boisterous laughter of the neighbors was faint now in her ears. She knew it was hateful to Stephen; she realized he was whipping up the excitement in her own blood to deafen her to it.

"The last time I danced with you," he said, "you were wearing . . . Remember?"

"Of course. Our Meschianza," she whispered.

"I thought I felt as badly as I ever could feel that night," he said. "But I hadn't even begun to feel then! God, what a long way we have come. Nothing but shame and suffering . . ."

"It doesn't have to be suffering, Stephen," she said urgently. "You can find something in it . . . I'm finding it every day . . . it's going to be a good life . . ."

"Everyone keeps saying that," he said bitterly. "What do you know about it, Amoret? You're only a child. . . ."

"It will be a good life if you make it good," she said sternly. "I'm giving you everything I have to put into it. And you must give me everything you have . . . all your love and

poetry . . . your fun and your cleverness . . . we'll *make* something out of it, Stephen. . . ."

"We'll make enough to get ourselves back to civilization," he said curtly.

"All right. We'll do that," she said calmly. "But for now at least, let's live what is here . . . the way it is . . . the best way it is. . . ."

"That's fair enough," he said after a moment. "We'll do that."

They kept dancing now, a quick, mad waltz. Sometimes he swung her out from him and lifted her recklessly over a little bush; sometimes he capered around her in a burlesque pantomime. The wildness and beauty of the night was getting into him now, and he was enjoying himself. Maybe there *was* something strange and wonderful and poetic about this crazy wilderness, if you didn't have to face it forever . . . It wouldn't be too bad, if they knew it would end sometime. . . .

Suddenly he stopped the nonsense and kissed her deeply. Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her back almost to the house.

"Put me down, Stephen," she protested. "We're respectable married people."

"We're lovers," he said. "That's all you and I ever are going to be. Lovers! If we live in this marriage for fifty years, Amoret . . . let's be lovers always. . . ."

"We will be."

"Not solemn ones," he said. "God, how I hate solemnity! Happy ones and carefree. . . ."

They went into the house now, and the neighbors ebbed back against the wall and left the center of the room free for their waltz. He whirled her with mock extravagance, beaming and winking at the farm-women as he danced.

"My, my . . . I never seen anything so graceful, seems like," they murmured in a fluster.

Then he turned Amoret over to Elk and swept Opal, protesting and stumbling with bashfulness, into his arms, and whipped her in a circle around the room, her feet scarcely touching the floor.

Before the evening was over, he had danced with every one of the delighted, blustering neighbor women. He doubled the whole roomful up with mirth when he tried to learn the

intricate figures of their "Weevily Wheat," and "Skip to my Lou." Finally, he insisted on being a dance-caller, making up outrageous new figures for "Dip the Oyster" and Chase the Rabbit."

"Mr. Phelps is a card," they said among themselves. "It's going to be a good winter for us . . . to have such a cut-up right here in the county. . . ."

(4)

The last wagon drove off not long before dawn; the last slow sleepy horse was roused up, and the lantern lighted, and the young'uns lifted and dumped in the back without even waking them up.

"We've never had a raisin' like the Phelps' raisin'," everybody said for the twentieth time, as the wagons plodded along one by one, across the plains, each feeble winking lantern eye growing sleepier and duller in the distance.

Stephen and Amoret stood in their own door and watched them go, and Stephen yawned and stretched his stiffened muscles.

"Well . . . was I good? . . . was I what you wanted me to be? . . ."

She put her arms around his body and hugged him wearily, and pressed her head into his chest and nodded it gratefully.

"What a day . . . we had everything in it, didn't we?" he said.

"Everything."

He turned around and looked inside at the bare room.

"So we've moved into our new home. You furnished it with a Bible, and I furnished it with a kiss. . . ."

"Stephen, I brought *two* first-things into our new home," she said, standing on her tiptoes and bending his face down so she could look into his eyes.

"Oh?"

"The Bible out of our past . . ." He could see she was not going on easily, so he helped her.

"And . . ."

"Our child for the future," she said. "They were the two things I brought into our new house tonight. . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

Her mind was a tall wilderness of dense pain, but in the center of it was a quiet pool. All the days of this winter crept down through the wilderness of pain, to peer at their own reflections in the pool. For the pool was delirium itself, which seemed to be mirroring everything Amoret had known this strange long winter. The reflections were elongated; then foreshortened almost out of recognition, as reflections are on the ripples of a pool. And yet, by their very distortions, they explained themselves more clearly than had the days.

That day when her child was trying to decide whether or not it would be born seemed longer than all her life had been. Her life before she came to Illinois seemed only a flowering branch of an invisible tree; this day which began in a windy March dawn and seemed never to end was as the wilderness itself compared to that one phrase of flowering bough. When she looked into the pool of her delirium, she saw the single pink shimmer of that small branch, but it was only a tremulous penciling among the crowded massive reflections of this winter. All her nineteen years before seemed but a moment; this day was eternity, suffocatingly close, then receding to a pin-prick of dazzling agony.

Each horizontal line of the boards in the wall pulsed with the agony of her body; each board shrank to a hair's width, then bloated monstrously to a stretched acre's length, expanding and contracting with her own rhythmic torture. Cold and heat followed the same pattern of expanding and contracting; it began as an infinitesimal atom of fire, growing larger until it swallowed up her whole body in one swooping flame; then this receded again to the frigidness of time before any light had been born into the universe. The voices in the room followed the same modulations of extremes, a thread of knife-keen whisper cutting the silence like a cruel treble wire, then deepening and broadening to snail-paced thunder so loud it crumpled the eardrums.

She heard Stephen's voice sometimes, coming to her in waves. She could scarcely understand the words, but she

knew they meant he was suffering, and she tried to lift the mountainous weight of her hand to touch him in comfort. She tried to raise the massiveness of her eyelashes so she could smile into his eyes, but her eyelids had valves of granite. Perhaps she was dead, she thought dejectedly. Stephen wouldn't like it at all if she were dead; it would look as if it were somehow his fault because he had given her this child to bear.

But he had not given it, she screamed inside herself with hilarity wild as wind; she had taken her child from him. Almost against his will, she had taken her child. Her hands felt again the hard quivering of his thighs when she had gripped them with her palms that first night they had spent on the Illinois prairie in the Larsens' lean-to. She had held his loins like a cruet and had poured out her sacred child into the vessel of herself.

She would not die, she said defiantly within herself. She had chosen this, and she would complete it in her own time. She tried to open her lips to tell Stephen that. She heard the words she wanted to say to him marching like a bright army across the clamor of this room.

"I will not die, Stephen. I plucked the child out of you, and I will pluck it out of me, when the moment comes."

She thought she must have said it, but when she tried to close her lips, she found she had not even opened them, for they seemed made of stone.

She heard a weak whimpering, and she raged within because it expressed her triumph so badly. Then she knew that the sound was not coming from her, but from Stephen, lying across the foot of her bed, pounding impotently with his fists because he could not help her.

"You must go away, Mr. Phelps," some woman was saying to him. "You must get hold of yourself, Mr. Phelps. If she is conscious, it will only distress her."

Then she did hear her own voice. "Let him stay," she said, as calmly as if she were standing at her table counting coffee spoons. "I want my husband to stay."

She knew he had roused up then . . . they all had . . . and the midwife bent over her and wiped a cool damp cloth across her forehead which felt gritty with salty anguish.

"You poor lamb . . . you poor little lamb . . . the first child is always the cruelest . . ." she said, but the voice wa-

vered in bands of whispering which swelled to screaming, keeping time with Amoret's body which was cringing then burgeoning with the pain.

"Amoret . . . if I could only help," Stephen said.

"You cannot come in," she said compassionately, and as she said the words, she knew she was speaking of more than this moment, which was a kind of keyhole locked against him. He could not enter the pain with her . . . but more than that, he could not enter anywhere. She felt tears across the bridge of her nose as she turned her head from side to side to escape their scalding. Those in the room would believe she was crying because of the pain; they would not know she was weeping with sorrow because Stephen, whom she loved so deeply, could not enter into those wonderful things which this winter in the wilderness had taught her.

The room with all its bare starkness, and her bridal petticoats cut into curtains to bring some grace to the crude windows, disappeared, and she was conscious only of the pool of her blessed delirium into which the days peered at their own reflections.

"If I could only remember all this," she thought distractedly to herself. "I could understand anything. . . ." She knew she touched some ultimate kernel of wisdom in that delirium, but she could not be sure of retaining it after this eternity had waned and time had resumed its ticking.

That day . . . that windy wonderful day last autumn. . . . The day the harp arrived by the freight wagon. Stephen and Mr. Adams were working in the north field, and the wagoner, who said he had never expected to see a genuine harp until he met up with the angels, carried the harp-trunk into the house and stood there puffing and gawping while Amoret with trembling fingers unlocked the case and opened it wide like a giant velvet-lined butterfly. The harp . . . that other-self of hers, lay within, gold and gleaming and beautiful, shaped like a wing on which you could rise to the very gates of heaven. She lifted it out of the trunk and stood the pedestal on the crude floor, and it seemed as if all the light in the room converged upon its lyric loveliness.

"She's a right purty thing," the wagoner said in a whisper. Little Emily Larsen fell on her knees beside the harp, the way a child will, and touched it humbly with one finger.

"Mrs. Phelps . . . I never saw anything so beautiful," the

child said. "I seen one oncet in a Sunday School pitcher . . . but it wasn't gold like this here one. . . ."

Amoret herself said nothing at all. She took out her velvet case of extra wires and began tightening the strings of the beloved body and replacing those which had snapped during the long journey. Her hands, already coarsened from unfamiliar work, felt their old sure skill coming back into them. Her hands, those two strong beings which led a rhapsodic life of their own quite separate from the rest of her, were tingling with eagerness, as if they had lain dead for many weeks. The hands became at once more delicate and yet more workmanly, as they went about their task, laying out red C gut strings and black F guts, and sorting out C and F copper wires from the silver ones. The hands, ardent and busy, slipped the new wires skillfully into the gauge and then inserted each into its own proper place. She checked the pegs of the first 18 wires on the sounding board, and inspected the knots of the gut strings to be sure they were fastened into their grooves, before she tightened the tuning key.

When the harp was complete again, she stood back and looked at it. Suddenly she saw the room as it was, not as it had become for her during the weeks she had learned to live in it. The room shrank and became haggard and mean, as would a plain woman's face under a too-elaborate hat. The harp did the room a harm from which it probably never could recover. The face of the room grew meaner, because it could not forgive the harp for its beauty.

She knew how the sight of that golden wing in this gray cocoon of a room would hurt Stephen. He had gradually become reconciled to its smallness and homeliness; he made little jokes about it now, which showed that he was even beginning to be fond of it. But the harp, more than any other object from their old life, would remind him of all that was graceful and gracious and lost. No contrast could have been more explicit than this visible one.

"Play something on it, Mrs. Phelps," the wagoner was saying, his voice husky with excitement. "I'd certain'y like to hear a good lively tune on that there mechanism."

"I cannot play it until it is tuned," Amoret said.

"Just let me hear it once," the driver begged. "I ain't got any ear for music myself. But I'd certain'y like to say I heard it. Don't make no difference how it sounds, Mrs. Phelps."

She ran her fingers lightly across it, and a demented, sad wail breathed out of it, a grieving senseless sound, as if it were asking the room to forgive it. The wagoner looked surprised.

"Mournful sounding thing, ain't it?" he said accusingly. "I b'lieve I prefer the fiddle. That's cheerful anyways."

She got rid of him quickly, for suddenly a caprice was forming in her. She snatched up the little braided rug that Opal had insisted upon giving her, and ran with it out to the bare ground in the cleared circle around their house. She placed it carefully on a level spot and called to Emily to bring out one of the homemade stools. Then with Emily's help she carried the harp out and stood it on the rug. The bright autumn sky was a wide proscenium arch; the round knoll sloped down like a concert stage; the maples quivered in their million leaves with multitudinous silent applause. Out here the harp dwarfed nothing. It's arrogant gold was no offense here, for the trees in the noon light were brighter even than it was.

From its pocket in the harp case she brought the purple velvet bag which held the tuning fork and the tuning key. Her expert fingers tightened the fourth C until its pitch matched the fork. Then she tuned the other strings in fifths and octaves. The whole-toned notes floated off through the blue and golden air like bubbles of honey, like globes of purest gold. She could imagine them rising to the treetops and beyond, free in the firmament, rising and rising like golden pollen, so that if God were looking down from a window, He would see that one of his children was flinging up a psalm. She lifted her face and smiled up at Him.

Now the forty-three strings were in tune, waiting for her hand. The little girl, enamored and silent, had withdrawn to the shadow of a tree, as if this were a great stage on which she must not intrude. Amoret sank down on the stool and rested her right wrist on the edge of the sounding board. Then the fingers of her left hand touched forth the first joyous chord of the Bach *Ave Maria*. Something which had been locked in her heart seemed to unfasten as sunshine melts the roof of a frozen stream. The music gushed forth now, strong and tall as a fountain rising and falling, tossing itself into the air, seemingly free and reckless, yet never unbound from the harp itself. It was motionless motion, as a fountain is both free and bound.

The child within her body leaped then for the first time, and it, too, was a fountain of liveliness and freedom in her. It was as if the child heard the music in its own blood, and leaped to answer it gladly. She thought she had never known such joy as she felt now, the sun warm on her lifted face, the music falling about her like golden rain, the child within her, almost dancing to tell her that he was with her, and that he understood.

Suddenly she was conscious that the little girl had moved. Her shadow fell fleetingly across the ground as she ran, almost guiltily, into the house. Amoret stopped the music, with laughter at the absurdity of the child's running away. Then she saw that Emily's face was turned over her shoulder as she ran, and following her look, Amoret saw Stephen and Mr. Adams standing at the bottom of the knoll. The sun was in their faces, so that she could not read them, but she knew there must be only joy and admiration on them both.

"Oh, Stephen . . . the most wonderful thing happened! . . ." She cried out, and then stopped, knowing she could not tell him now that their son had leaped within her, "The harp . . . I've managed to get it strung . . . and tuned . . . I brought it out here. . . ."

"I should say you did," Stephen said, coming rather clumsily up the incline toward her. "You look like a daft woman sitting out here with the harp." He tried to say it playfully, but she saw he was not pleased.

"I've never heard a harp played in the open, Stephen," she said. "It has a wild wonderful sound, hasn't it? It sounds like something in a legend . . . It sounds like the Irish thing it is . . . it was made for playing in the forest, you know. . . ."

She found she was babbling a bit, almost apologizing because of the wildness and the beauty of this moment. She wanted to say, "Darling, it was too good to stay in that drab little room . . . it hurt that dear room too badly. . . ." But she knew that would be even madder than this babbling.

Stephen frowned down at her, his face remembering reluctantly. "Poor little harp," he said. "If we had loved it, we wouldn't have humiliated it this way. I suppose the same thing could be said about you, my dear. A man who loved you couldn't have humiliated you by bringing you here. Neither of you belong. . . ."

"Nonsense, Stephen," she said, and let her hands dip into the music again. Her fingers scooped up arpeggios of merri-

ment and tossed them into the air as if they were white butterflies that danced and swirled in the sunshine with unholy gaiety.

Joel Adams came up the hill slowly. He had taken off his hat, and his face in the open light was filled with pleasure, running over with pleasure like a lavish cup.

"I never thought I'd hear such a thing on this hill," he said. "I knew there would be children playing . . . and puppies, and flowers having time to grow, and people laughing and working . . . I've pictured all kinds of good things happening on this hill. But I never thought there'd be such music."

The little girl Emily had come close again and was jumping up and down in helpless delight.

"Play something else, Mrs. Phelps," she cried. "Play something maybe Mr. Adams can sing to. He's got a right fine voice, pa says."

"A harp does its own singing," Joel Adams said, with sudden bashfulness.

All four of them, the neighbor child, the man they chose to call their "hired" man, Amoret, and the beloved invisible babe, all were united in the pleasure and wonder of this moment. Only Stephen stood apart from it, hunched in his private shame, not able to see what was here, because of what was not here.

"Stephen, listen," Amoret said in an anguish of wanting him to be part of this. "I played this for you one night . . . remember?"

But he could not listen comfortably. He made some perfunctory acknowledgment of the music, then went into the house. After a few minutes, Amoret swept off some chords to bring the music to a stopping place. The little girl said, "If you could hear sunshine, comin' down after two-three days of rain . . . that's the way it would sound, Miz Phelps."

They talked about the stringing of the harp; she explained it to Mr. Adams and the child, and all the time her heart was calling to Stephen to come back and be a part of this, for everyone's sake. Joel Adams picked up the tuning fork and took it out of its velvet shroud, listening to its fidelity, as Amoret explained it. He was rocking back and forth on his heels as he thought about it, his face lifted in the sunlight as if he were hearing some larger tuning fork . . . yes, that was it . . . she had tried many times to think of that simile, when she

watched him as he talked. He often looked as if he were listening to some tuning fork which God Himself held aloft, so that he could pitch his own words and his thoughts. . . .

He spoke of it then, as if he, too, had been searching for that metaphor all his life. Even now in her delirium, Amoret remembered how they had spoken almost as one person, as if they had both found that figure of speech together at the same time . . . as if God had said it aloud in them both.

She had been so moved by the whole morning, and by that quiet climax of understanding, that she felt she could bear no more. She had turned to the house, almost in relief, at exactly the moment that he, too, turned to the pails which he always filled from the well before they ate their dinner.

"Oh, I've almost forgotten about the food . . ." she murmured.

"Oh, I've almost forgotten about getting the water," he said at the same time. And then they smiled at each other, and the little girl smiled at them both.

"Come move in the harp, Stephen," Amoret called out. "It mustn't stand too long in the sunlight. . . ."

He came out, stumbling rather blindly, and picked up the harp in his arms almost as if it were a woman, a shameless woman who needed to be clothed with a house. Without a word Amoret followed him, crying within herself . . . "This was such a beautiful moment for the rest of us . . . please open Stephen's heart to see it . . . let him see."

Stephen said sullenly, "Where shall I put it?" He stood it in the center of the floor, and the crude square chest and tables and chairs seemed to move nearer to each other, as if they feared the very delicacy. They huddled in a sulky conspiracy against the harp, which stood arched and proud like the golden wing of an invisible angel.

"It will hover over this room and bless it," Amoret said.

"It will make this wretched place harder for me to bear!" Stephen cried with fierce shame. "I'll never look at it without feeling how poor we are. . . ."

"We're not poor," Amoret said. "We were rich before, and now we're even richer, for we're going to have music, Stephen. We have love and a child and now music."

"I wish the thing had been lost on the way," he said. "I wish it had fallen off the freight boat and had drowned."

It was not just a mood with him, as she thought it surely

must be. She waited for it to pass, but during the next few days the harp in the room only depressed him more deeply.

"I'll never look at it without bitterness," he said. "It used to stand for everything that was beautiful and elegant. All that's gone."

"We've kept the best, every one of us," Amoret told him. "You've kept your courage, the harp has kept its music, and I . . . why, Stephen, I had never been born until I came out here . . . I never would have known what being alive meant. . . ."

He broke in harshly. "We've all lost what we had," he said passionately. "Seeing you out there trying to play that harp . . . with your body misshapen . . . you looked like a prairie woman . . . that calico dress . . . and your rolled-up sleeves. And your hands . . . your poor hands stumbling over the strings. . . . I couldn't bear it, Amoret."

She looked at her hands in surprise. Yes, they were red, and there were puckers on their backs from wringing out clothes and carrying heavy weights; the nails were broken and she had not buffed them for weeks. They didn't look like her hands. . . . And probably they had not played with skill . . . probably they *had* stumbled over the strings, as he said. Her heart had heard the music, not her ears.

In her delirium now, she skipped the steps of suffering by which she arrived at the thing she finally did to the harp. It was easy to live it again in the delirium, because its original seemed unreal.

Stephen had flung himself out of the house that particular night, because he could not sit comfortably in the room where the harp was. He did not say that, but he kept his back turned to it as he bent over his awkward, impatient cobbling, which had looked so simple as Mr. Adams had explained how to do it, but was such mean, unwelcome work in Stephen's hands. Finally he could stand the room no longer, so he had thrown down his hammer and the hated brogan, and had seized his coat to go out.

"Go to bed when you're sleepy," he had mumbled. "Don't bother about me, Amoret . . . I'm just going to walk awhile. . . ."

Without making up her mind, she knew then what she was going to do. She waited until she was sure he was safely away from the house. Then she put on her own coat and

propped the door of the cabin open with a chair, thinking nothing at all, nothing at all. She took off the cover that shrouded that bright, golden other-self, and lifted the harp in her arms. It was too heavy for her to carry it easily, so she set it down again, and seized its proud head with her two hands and dragged it across the floor, callously bumping it down the steps of the house. The light from the door made a wide arrowhead across the darkness, and her lumpy misshapen shadow, dragging the harp across the ground, was an ugly gnomish thing out of an unhappy fairy tale.

She was crying now, but only with her body; her mind was refusing to have any part of this. Sometimes the pedestal of the harp struck a root or a stump and balked at going farther; it was as if she were dragging an unwilling victim who was clutching at the very ground to resist. The pedals, like helpless fingers, caught and held and then were torn loose from their grasp as the harp tried to save itself. But she dragged it along mercilessly down the hill to the dark part of the woods around the river. The current was very deep here, for this was where Mr. Adams and Stephen were building the dam for their mill. They had built a wall of log cribs, and these they were filling with loads of stone, making the wall higher and higher to hold back the current for a deep millpool.

The water was almost black, with flakes of chalky moonlight rocking on the ripples. She did not hesitate. She planted her feet wide to balance that unwieldy body of hers, and pulled the harp upright beside her. They stood together a moment, neither looking at the other, because neither could ever forgive the other for what was happening. Then she assembled her last syllable of strength and raised the harp from the bank and slipped it into the water. It went down soundlessly, and only the wild fluttering of the flakes of moonchalk on the water told that it had gone. She bent over, and now she was breathless and sobbing. She peered into the water and saw the harp lying on the bottom like a drowned body, with only a pale shimmer to mark it.

She started back up the hill, so tired and heavy now that she could barely drag her weight. For a wild dark moment she thought of turning back and slipping into the water with the harp. She saw them both lying at the bottom, her arms around the harp, her head upon its golden neck, her hair tangled in its golden strings. But she saw it for only a moment; it

was only a suggestion of the mind's tired eye, rejected as soon as it was seen. The lustiness of her rejecting cheered her immeasurably, for it showed her how fierce her spirit was, and how outrageous was its courage and its curiosity.

"Nothing could kill a woman like me," she said in herself. "I might toy with tears and discouragement and sorrow . . . but nothing could really beat me down now. I have work in me to do, and life in me to live. Nothing really could stop me. . . ."

Her tears were still falling, and her body was still heavy, but none of it convinced her of her weakness. It was only a momentary disguise for the strength of her, and she knew it, and she laughed . . . as she was laughing to herself now under this fluctuating pain of birth, under this delirium of vision while her child was being born.

Then a little way apart from her in the shot light and shadow of the woods of the hill, she saw a tall figure move. It was Stephen, and he must have watched her. . . .

She called out to him, "Stephen? I've drowned the harp, darling. It doesn't matter to me, and if it made you unhappy. . . ."

The tall shadow separated itself from the shape of the tree trunk, and came out into the moonlight. The shadow said nothing, and she laughed and staggered a little with the inequality of her body's weight winged with the lightness of her heart.

"You should have come and helped me," she said. "Only you're too sensible, Stephen . . . you wouldn't have let me do it, would you?"

Then the shadow did speak, and the voice was as heavy as her own body. But it was not Stephen's voice.

"Mrs. Phelps . . . I'm not meaning to spy on you, ma'am, . . ." Joel Adams said. "I had no right to see you . . . and then I was afraid of frightening you. . . ."

She couldn't think what to say to him for a moment. Now that there was no need for her courage, she sank down on the ground, too weary to stand. She put her forehead weakly against her knees like a child too tired to speak. She heard him coming slowly across to her, and she saw his feet beside her, but still she did not lift her head and look up at him.

"You don't have to tell me," he said gently. "You are a brave woman, Mrs. Phelps, ma'am."

"It was like murder. I think maybe I'd commit a real murder, if Stephen needed it for his happiness. . . ."

He said something to her then, which she had not been able to remember all the time between that night and this moment. She had tried over and over to remember it; she had thought sometime she must ask him what it was, and yet she could not do that. For none of them had ever spoken about the harp. In the daylight, you could see it shimmering at the bottom of the dammed-up water. Stephen knew what she had done, of course; yet they never mentioned its absence from the room.

But now beside the pool of her delirium in the dense forest of birth agony, she heard what it was that Joel Adams had said to her that night.

"You are a big woman married to a little man, Mrs. Phelps. You must not try to make your deeds small enough for him. You must keep them big enough for you."

Through the days when she was working in her cabin, which was calm and restored now because the harp was not there to plague it, she had tried to remember what he had said that night. Her loyalty and her love had erased it from her mind. But now in the delirium, it was not erased, and the words, unwelcome and presumptuous, said themselves again. Lying here now in this swelling and shrinking universe of pain, she felt herself furious against the man who had said such a thing to her. He had no right! When her child was born, she would see that Joel Adams was sent away from their world . . . She would grip her memory around that treachery he had uttered so it could not escape her again, and as soon as she was well and up from this childbed . . .

"You are a big woman married to a little man." She would deal with him, never fear.

Then she lapsed into the sweet pasture of something this same man had told her one morning. She had gone out by herself that day for the sheer pleasure of knowing this earth, so new and motherly and generous. She often went out when the morning's work had come to a small pause. Before the cold settled in, she sometimes lay on the ground, with the tall, brittle autumn straw touching its fingers over her body. She felt as if she could hear the heart of the ground beating under her heart; she could feel sometimes the very milk in the earth's breast flowing to feed its chosen children. She

never told Stephen she lay like this on the ground; Stephen would have been horrified and shocked. He would have warned her about insects and snakes. With Stephen she would have been deathly afraid of meeting a snake. But somehow by herself, she knew that she had in her such benevolence, such oneness with the one life that flowed through every little creature in God's world, that nothing would attack her. She could hurt nothing, and nothing could be her enemy. . . . It would not be logic which one could tell to Stephen. It would not even be something one would try to wrap into words. It was only something to know secretly, as the best things are known.

She was running along, realizing how awkward and clumsy she must appear, yet not caring. It was too cold this morning to be still, for the wind was whittling even the sunbeams to sharpness. The sensible women were all in their kitchens, with shawls crossed over their breasts, stirring some pot, scouring some surface, and looking out the window crossly at the sharp blue wind. But she was not a sensible woman . . . she was a woman in love with the earth. . . .

Suddenly she stopped short. Under her feet was a patch of cold-stiffened mud. Frozen in it, with tiny flutings of ice, were footprints that stopped the very beating of her heart. She dropped down and looked closer. Yes, they were unmistakable. The tiny bare footprints of a child, just big enough to walk. There was a round heel mark, a hollow under the rise of the metatarsus . . . there were the tiny dimpled marks of toes and toenails . . . The child must have run across this field barefoot . . . the footprints cut diagonally across the open island of mud, and then disappeared again in the overgrown, clumpish dried grass. Her heart was beating so wildly now she thought she would surely faint. A conglomeration of stories she had heard about Indians kidnaping white children flooded through her . . . but Stephen had laughed when she asked him about that. That had all been finished twenty years ago, he said . . . and probably even then they had been only stories. . . .

She must find the child. There were no bigger footprints beside the small ones. The baby must have wandered away alone . . . it might be lying somewhere, at this moment, half-frozen and hungry. She ran in a wide circle through the brittle undergrowth, calling out and looking. She had better

go call the men, who were working down on the dam every day now. She hurried toward the top of the hill where she could shout down to them. But nearly there, she decided not to alarm Stephen until she had to. Stephen, who was always on the very verge of loathing this country . . . he would be sickened and heartbroken by this. So she called only Mr. Adams.

"Stephen . . . can you spare Mr. Adams? . . . I want him to move something heavy for me . . ." she cried, making her voice sound as casual as possible. Joel Adams dropped what he was doing, and hurried up the hill to her.

"Something terrible . . . I've found the footprints of a child . . . it must be lost somewhere around here," she said to him. "Come look. We'll have to do something . . . I couldn't bear to tell my husband. . . ."

She ran ahead of him, back to the little hyphen of mud between the two tangles of frozen underbrush. "Look . . . it's only a baby," she said . . . "its little feet are no longer than my little finger. . . ."

He bent over her and looked where her trembling finger was pointing, his face grave and frightened as hers was. Then he straightened up and laughed.

"That's not a baby, Mrs. Phelps."

"Look at its heel . . . and its little toes . . ."

"It's a coon print . . . see, the back feet! And here are the forefeet . . ." His dark eyes were twinkling with relief. "I've seen them hundreds of times." He sat back on his heels then, telling her about a raccoon he had once had for a pet, about its sharp little nose that quivered like a bunny's nose. They forgot they were a man and a woman, and he the man hired by her husband. They became just two lovers of the earth, two people who were learning to read the letters from God written into the universe.

She wasn't sure how they ran from subject to subject, how they forgot that time was passing while they stood here above the raccoon prints exploring each other's faces and each other's thoughts. She must have told him something of what this America meant to old Tobias, and how he had willed the meaning to her, so that every day she was inheriting it more and more.

He said, "Ma'am, our country is different from every other country that ever was. Our history is a record of people

choosin' an ideal . . . instead of being satisfied with what they had. Freedom . . . that was what they chose."

"We always teach that to children," Amoret said. "We say, 'Freedom to worship God brought the settlers here.' But I guess some people take the freedom and forget the worship."

Joel Adams looked at her carefully. "Some do, ma'am, but a lot don't. Lots of men in this country died and I reckon a lot still will die, fightin' for what America means."

"Most nations didn't really begin, you might say, on one special day. But we did. We started ourselves goin' because we were looking for something. Most people think Christopher Columbus was jest looking for a short-cut to riches . . . or maybe he was jest pushing on beyond ignorance to find out the real facts about the earth. But I saw an old book once that had Columbus's own words in it, where he said he was looking for a fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's words about a new country. The first book he brought ashore with him was a Bible. And ever since, when we've drawn up papers, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and all our laws really . . . we've put God's name somewhere in them."

"Yes. All men are 'endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,'" Amoret quoted hesitantly, because such words were unfamiliar in her voice.

"That was the beginnin' of democracy, I reckon . . . all men equal before God . . . and all men brothers before Him."

"That must be the way God sees us."

"It was an idea that had to remake the world, ma'am," he said reverently. "And it *is* remaking it . . . it'll take a long time maybe, but it'll do it finally."

His voice seemed to be burning with feeling now. When he finally got a church, he would make a great preacher. But he didn't need a church . . . he could build a church wherever he stood . . . here in this field, with wind for the altar and sky for the nave. . . .

"Those old settlers, ma'am . . . they built on their Bibles. They weren't ignorant men who came here. They were poor, most of them, but they had roused up their minds in them. They had picked themselves out from the masses that didn't come. . . ."

He had forgotten her now, she could see. He was talking as he must usually think to himself. "Why, their faces were

turned to the future . . . the way our faces are, out here in this wilderness. There ain't no past for pioneers . . . it's all future! They knew God was using them to work out some big purpose . . . and they were glad to be used by Him. . . ."

Amoret said, eager to bring him back to her, "The way I'm glad, Mr. Adams." He looked down at her, startled by what he must have seen in her face.

"Yes . . . you're one of them, ma'am. God's sprinkled us right across the history page of this country . . . big names and little ones . . . there will always be His people to do His work. . . ." He broke off a moment, then he went on again:

"Why, ma'am, take the Declaration of Independence. Jesus said, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.' And those old fathers of our country, what did they write? 'We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.' Same thing, ain't it, ma'am?"

"And we do it, too," Amoret cried. "Out here we all do for each other!" As she said it, she recognized how the wilderness idiom "do for" had slipped into her speech as naturally as woman's skill had slipped into her hands for the tasks' sake. This life had taken her unto itself, was forming her anew in its image and likeness. An idea had come into her mind, a desire had entered her heart, and it was acting through her now and shaping her and her life in new ways, just as Mr. Adams was telling her the idea behind America had shaped its people to itself.

That was God's work, wasn't it . . . it was not a mysterious thing far off from daily understanding. It was simple as loving someone, and then acting upon that love as she acted upon it for Stephen every moment, sparing him from knowing whatever would hurt him like this footprint on the mud . . . thrusting out of her life whatever displeased him . . . even her beloved harp. . . .

Joel Adams was saying, "Everybody in America . . . everybody that is here now, and the children who aren't even born yet . . . all have something to do to help work out what has started. The Bible says, 'You are a chosen nation to show forth the praises of him who called you out of darkness into light.'"

"What darkness . . . what light?"

"Out of poverty . . . and ignorance and being scared of

each other . . . we're building new cities here in the woods to get away from all that . . . We're full of that darkness . . . but there's a spark of light in every one of us . . . you *know* that, ma'am."

They were not learned words . . . they would never be the vibrant words that Stephen could say if ever he caught this light they were fumbling for. But the meaning behind them was a good meaning. It was bigger than any man who could try to say it. It was God himself, borrowing a voice from man, Amoret thought. That would always be God's way of speaking. He would speak through grass blowing under wind . . . He would speak through the patience of rocks . . . the trusting of children . . . the outstretched hand of a man . . . He would speak in men's deeds to each other. . . . Some words formed in her mind and said themselves clearly, summing up this surge of wordless thinking which had been in her.

"I shall be the step which thy foot taketh."

Where had they come from, those words? From Tobias' Bible, in one of those moments when she flew to the book and dipped up a cupful of its meaning to slake her thirst? Or had they come to her in some other way . . . ? She wanted terribly to know. She thrust aside her shyness and her inarticulateness because she had to find out.

"Have you ever read a verse in the Bible that says, 'I shall be the step which thy foot taketh'?"

He looked down at her, and he seemed to understand how important it was to her.

"That happens, Mrs. Phelps," he said gently. "When you begin to live by the Book, it speaks into your thoughts sometimes so that you cannot tell where the words come from. Do you think it would be irreverent to say that God spoke His words into your mind?"

She smiled up at him and shook her head. "I think it happened," she said.

Then he told her one more thing. A quotation from somewhere. "'Searching the Almighty we cannot find him out,'" he said. "I reckon you have to notice that word '*out*.' You cannot find Him outside . . . you must listen to Him within you . . . And then He speaks . . . He really does, ma'am."

They heard Stephen calling, and there he was striding toward them. They turned guiltily, and Amoret ran a few

steps away from Mr. Adams, and then realized that the best explanation would be the truth, so she stopped and went back to stand beside the footprints.

"Come look, Stephen," she called out, and told him about the prints she had mistaken for a child's. He barely glanced down at them; his face was dark and angry.

Now in her delirium, his dark questioning face swelled up nearly as big as the sky itself. She heard grunting and the muttered sounds of male anger . . . and then the crack of a fist against flesh. She saw the tangled legs and the angry flailing arms of men fighting, and she heard herself screaming. She allowed herself to go on screaming, for it seemed to fit in perfectly with this pain in her body. She was killing two birds with one stone, she said thriftily to herself in the nightmare; she was crying out in childbirth, and she was also screaming with fear because Stephen and Joel Adams were rolling back and forth across the ground in a fist fight.

But no . . . that was not the day of the fist fight. She tried to clarify the shifting memories reflected on the pool of her delirium. No . . . the morning of the raccoon's footprints was not the morning of the fist fight. Yet now she saw for the first time that the fight really *had* started on that morning, although it had appeared then that Stephen had controlled himself very well. He had tried to make a kind of uncomfortable joke about finding her and Joel Adams talking for a half hour, forgetting everything else.

"I suppose you two have been chit-chatting about the Bible," he had said. "I've noticed that it's a kind of guilty secret between you, Mrs. Phelps. Well, let's leave all that for Sunday, shall we?" Though he had smiled, she had known how angry Stephen was . . . his pleasantness was almost worse than if he had given in to his temper.

Anger had fermented along in him, waiting days for a chance to break out from some surface cause, from an occasion that would not involve his wife. She saw that now, as she had not seen it at the time. So the fist fight really *was* about her, after all! And about the Bible. But Stephen was not a man who could fight with his fists about such things as his wife and a book. Stephen was too civilized for that. If he were going to use his fists, it would have to be about something men *could* settle with fists. . . .

She was not really sure just how the fight had started, be-

cause of course she had not been present. It had happened down at the dam site, where they worked every day during the winter, building the four great hollow log pillars which they filled with stones, so that the grist mill might set solidly above the dam. Nat Burden and Lem James came over and worked a day every now and then. Or if they could not spare the day themselves, they hired out their horses or oxen to Stephen and Mr. Adams. It would be a long job, but it was going to be worth all the hard cruel work, for Mount Hollow had no grist mill and Stephen would some day have a fine flour milling business here. But now he could barely afford to pay for a day's work occasionally from the neighbors.

He and Joel Adams worked every day from sun-up until it was too dark to see. Sometimes they even worked by lantern light, and Mr. Adams said that lantern-light work was the margin that made the difference between just ordinary hard-working men, and Stephen.

Oh, yes, the fight; she was thinking about that, she reminded herself, as if the pain of remembering might in some way relieve this racking ache of her body. She strummed a chord on the two strings of pain, the past and present, as if her body were a strung harp.

"*No! No more harp!*" she screamed in a feverish whisper. She hoped she had not screamed it aloud, for it would hurt Stephen. But it was too late to try to hold back the words, for she heard Stephen, here in this room full of candlelight, gasp out something halfway between a sob and a curse against the harp. Resuming the privacy of her delirium, she remembered that Nat Burden had tried to explain the way the fight had started.

"Men git to braggin' when they're by themselves with no wimmin to listen," Nat had said. "I don't rightly remember who started it, Miz Phelps. But as seein' how mad it made Mr. Phelps, we all got to braggin' about how strong Mr. Adams is. You see, Mr. Phelps thinks of himself as the better man, if you'll excuse me, ma'am."

"Why, naturally," Amoret had said wide-eyed. "He is the better man, in every way."

Nat Burden had just let a thud of silence answer that. "So then we got to puttin' up bets who could fling the other, the three best out of four. We jes' kind of deviled Mr. Phelps, ma'am, for none of us would put up any bets on *him*. So he

got to braggin' then about how he had done this and that out there in Philadelphia . . . and first thing you know, they was grapplin'.

"Joel Adams picked him up and flung him down twicet, easy as a bag of meal . . . and he coulda done it twicet more, I reckon . . . but then Mr. Phelps got real mad. Not just sportin' mad. Honest to God fit-ter-kill, he got. 'Let's make it a boxing match . . . if yer not afeerd, you preachin', pulin', son-uva-something. . . . Beggin' your pardon, ma'am,'" Nat Burden said.

It must have been about at that point that Amoret had heard the roaring and the shouting. For she had come running down from the cabin just in time to see the worst of the fight, the bloody, sobbing angry end of it, with Stephen's eye battered, and Mr. Adams' face white as paper and the two of them rolling over and over in the sawdust and axe chips and snow, like beasts . . . or boys.

She had screamed. Afterwards she had felt quite sure that she was only afraid it was Stephen who would injure the hired man, and that that would be such a shameful thing for Stephen to have to forgive himself, that she had to prevent its happening. But now in her delirium, she knew perfectly well that she had screamed because she knew that the preacher, who after all was a woodsman with muscles made like iron by hard work, was going to kill her husband if somebody didn't stop him. She had screamed and had run down the hill, and in the rough and tumble she caught Stephen's bloodshot eye and knew that the sight of her was not going to stop him. He was going to fight all the harder with her there to see him. . . . He had become a savage who had to show other savages that brains didn't make a man weak.

But the fight did stop, nevertheless. It stopped abruptly. It was an added indignity that it was Joel Adams himself who stopped it. He pulled himself free of the whipping arms and legs of the other man, and got up to his feet, reeling a little. He plucked a handful of blood from his mouth, and then reached down and picked Stephen up as easily as if he had been a youngster. He stood him on his feet, and the two of them staggered a second. Then Joel thrust out his hand and grasped Stephen's in a handshake, as if this *had* been only a sporting event between friends.

"You're the best of the two of us, Mr. Phelps," he said.

Stephen said nothing at all for a few seconds. He was badly winded, and shamed besides. Then he did say something, quite surprising.

"I've wanted to pound hell out of you, Adams, ever since the first day I talked to you," Stephen said. "Sooner or later we had this fight coming. I'm glad we got it out of our hides at last."

Joel Adams mopped his bloody mouth with the back of his hand. Then he spoke without any anger at all. If anything, it was sadness in his voice. "But what you're fightin' isn't in me, son," he said. "It's something you've got inside yourself that you're trying to pound to a jelly."

That made Stephen wild with rage. For a second it looked as if the fight was going to begin all over again. Then Joel threw his arm around Stephen's shoulders and held him, and with what little breath he had left, he said, "We've got to be friends, Mr. Phelps, you and me. We've got no choice about it, 'pears like. So we might as well be willing friends."

And now suddenly there was such thunder of blood in her ears that she could hear no more of her own disordered remembering. The pool of her delirium was split by a lightning of agony that knifed and criss-crossed the surface of her mind until it was lacerated into unconsciousness. Blackness came down and snuffed her out, and she thought it was death at last.

But after an eternity of that death, there was a tiny dribble of sound. A puny little grape-cluster of sounds dangled over her. She knew what it was. She roused up out of the dark death and listened to it, and it oozed through her body like the seeping of warmth into a frost-bitten limb. *It was her son crying.*

The noise fanned out now into larger dimension; it took on length and breadth, and became color and motion, the fat chuckle of the midwife, her feet padding back and forth, the frangipani fragrance of her calico bosom as she lifted and tugged, her mouth clucking with satisfaction.

"Such a pretty . . . such a pretty . . . and the little mother herself . . . sleepabye, now sleepabye. . . ." Her hand, a white wing of motherliness was smoothing the sheet up over Amoret's shoulder.

"My son?" she asked, but surely not with her lips.

"Yes, my pretty . . . such a nice big boy . . . sleepabye now."

Then she did manage to speak. She heard her voice, clear and happy and strong-sounding.

"Now I have someone," she heard herself saying. "I have my little Stephen . . . who can inherit our fortune. . . ."

"Your fortune, my pretty?"

"Why, yes," she said in a very loud clear voice. "Our great fortune which my husband's father left us. It will belong to him . . . he will be rich as his grandfather was. . . ."

"Rich, hmm?"

"Don't tell anyone . . . my husband doesn't want anyone to know. . . ."

She began to weep now, weak, weary tears because she was not able to make her meaning clear. She saw the women's faces in a kind of funnel above her head . . . Mrs. Nat Burden's face, and the midwife from Mount Hollow . . . and Mrs. Arzie Dane who had the hare lip. . . . Their faces had loose eyes in them, rolling toward each other, sending some kind of messages back and forth. The mouths were pinched into buttonhole shapes. The funnel of faces was spinning round and round like the tornado they had had on the prairie in August, when the dog fennel was blooming. . . .

She drifted off into emptiness at last. She had her little Stephen. . . . Her work for today was done.

CHAPTER SIX

She was so happy at first with the baby that she did not notice what had happened. Her earth had four cardinal points that spring, the east, west, south, and north of the cabin, and around it the universe of Stephen's love, and his pride in his son. If Amoret missed seeing people, it was mostly because she craved some new face which could break into ripples of admiration when she displayed her wonderful child. She had expected that everyone would come to marvel at him. But nobody came . . . except to return something which they had borrowed, or to ask evasively that something be given back which they had loaned. As soon as the uneasy transaction was completed, Amoret would fly to Stevie's crib and show him off. They had no choice then but to admire.

"You kin see he's goin' to be a handsome man all right," the farm women said, looking half at him and half at his father.

"But first he's going to be a baby," Amoret felt like reminding them. "I'm going to keep him a baby for as long as I can, and teach him everything I know."

When the farm men were coerced into inspecting the new baby, they, too, saw him not as an infant, but as an asset.

"Well, you got your first crop, Mr. Phelps," said Lem James, on the day he came to bring back Stephen's whetstone. "A nice strong young'un, I must say. What's he run in weight?"

Stephen restrained his impatience at showing the child on the hoof, like a heifer, for he could see his neighbor was perfectly sincere in his compliment.

"Man needs plenty of land, and plenty of young'uns to help him work it. You can git along good thataway," Lem expounded.

"That's not my way of getting along," Stephen said. "No man can get rich waiting for his sons to grow up and help him work a farm."

"Mebbe not, mebbe no. . . ." Lem conceded, "but you kin git more out of kids than kittens, ef you bring 'em up right."

He laughed noisily at this homemade epigram, and then seeing that Stephen wasn't joining in, he quieted down. "Yep. You did the right thing, gittin' a boy, Mr. Phelps. You made the right start, and you did the right thing. Now you just keep at it."

During the winter, before Stevie was born, there had scarcely been a Sunday morning when they hadn't heard the grating squeak of a wagon driving up to their hill, and then the spilled-out family of children running to the front door.

"Ma says we've come to visit you'uns," the children would say bashfully when Amoret opened the door to them. Behind them would be the only less bashful ma herself, trundling the inevitable baby on one bony hip, and the man of the family bringing his gun just in case he saw food afoot.

"We've come to spend the day, ma'am," the mother would explain with simple dignity. "Ef it ain't inconvenient to you to have us, that is."

Sometimes it was more than inconvenient. It was almost impossible, because that winter they had no food of their own growing, and this was the long segment of the year when families ate what they had spent the other months preparing. Corn, of course, was the principal food for men and cattle. Corn dominated thought and work; it seemed sometimes as if life revolved around corn, the ploughing and planting, the harvesting and the milling, and finally the eternal cooking of the corn.

"A body wouldn't starve if he had plenty of corn dodgers," Opal told Amoret. So the first household art she learned was the making of these and hoe-cakes. She learned to mix the cornmeal with plenty of eggs and good rich milk, and then to spread the yellow batter on the skillet. Opal said she guessed the early comers really had once baked them on the heels of their hoes, metal bein' scarce like it was. The covered skillets baked among the ashes, with a shovel full of hot coals set upon the top to complete the oven. It made a big round cake, hard-crust ed outside, and meltingly soft and delicious within. She learned too to make corn mush, to be eaten warm with milk and a lacing of honey, or to be sliced cold and fried crisp with bits of pork and a seasoning of sage. Sometimes she felt that the very bones and flesh of Illinois was corn. And the wildfire madness of the people which broke out usually when they tried to celebrate . . . that, too, came from corn,

poured out of a jug. The Phelpsese had to buy their corn from neighbors or from the store in Mount Hollow.

Joel Adams gave them more food than either of them quite realized. Stephen kept an account of his dealings with Joel Adams, and scrupulously wrote down \$12 every month for wages, to be applied against the purchasing of Adams' land. But there were many items of indebtedness which couldn't be written into this account. Joel gave freely of everything he had, his pigs to be slaughtered and eaten through the winter, the milk from his cow . . . his hearty comradeship, when the tension in the cabin needed to be leavened, his gracious absence when Stephen could bear no more of him. He gave instruction often desperately required, and he gently covered it with tact so that it felt not like one man teaching another, but two men venturing into discovery together.

No matter how big had been the families arriving unannounced on Sunday, Amoret always managed somehow to welcome and feed them, for she loved them, sight unseen. But by spring, after Stevie was born, it appeared that the neighbors had rounded out the full circle of their visiting. For week after week, no one came driving up to the hill. It troubled her a little. But Stephen said, "Thank God, they've got their curiosity satisfied at last! God knows what they expect to find here, but from the way they stare and ask questions, something really outlandish."

"They only want to be friendly," Amoret said. "That's why it seems strange to me that they don't come over any more."

"Be thankful," Stephen said. "I am. A Sunday by ourselves is all I ask after the hard week's work. I can almost believe I'm a human being again on Sunday, and not some appendage connected to an ox team. I've been hitched to my plow so steadily that sometimes I wake up in the night and still feel reins running over my left shoulder and under my right armpit, and that big knot Joel tied in 'em rubbing a callous on my shoulder-blades."

The spring Sundays were wonderful, Stepehn lying on his back or his stomach under the walnut tree, reading a book . . . the baby, fat and inscrutable, staring and waving his fists . . . and Amoret herself sitting like a little girl, with her arms clasped around her drawn-up knees, thoughtfully contented, drugged with the luxury of idleness and dreams.

"If we starve to death, we're not going to work on

Sunday," Stephen had said. "I'll kill myself six days a week, but on Sunday I'm going to be a gentleman." He had stuck to it, difficult though that determination was because there was always some urgent work crying to be done.

Joel Adams was never around on Sunday, for Mount Hollow claimed him then. Early in the morning he mounted his own saddle horse and rode the four miles to town. While Stephen was being a gentleman, Joel Adams was being a man of God. Not a preacher yet, for that would have been presumptuous without a church built. But he could talk to them, and read to them from his Bible on Sunday morning, when they gathered to listen and to pray in one of the houses in the town. All day Sunday Joel was a servant of God . . . and a servant of men. There were tasks aplenty for him to perform; nothing was too humble for him. After meetin' one Sunday he had cooked up for a week ahead and had washed the clothes in Jed Junham's house, where Jed's woman lay low with milk sickness, and the young'uns were too little to do for themselves.

Joel Adams could chop down a tree or braid a little girl's hair with equal skill; he could perform a marriage ceremony, or beat up a bully; he could hold a group of children silent and absorbed while he told them about the Revolution or Daniel in the lion's den (and all the time he was telling, he could be mending a pair of shoes neater than anybody else in the country); he knew how to mix herb tea for the Illinois shakes, as they called the ague, and how to splice rope so only your fingers could find the joining. Once he had set a man's collarbone after he had been obliged to break it for him, because the man was drunk and had gone hog-wild. Sundays were busy days for Joel Adams.

But for the Phelpses the weeks revolved silently like a six-spoked wheel around the hub of Sunday, and sometimes three weeks turned on their axle without Amoret's seeing a strange face. Since the baby had been born, even little Emily Larsen was no longer with them. For some reason Opal had said she couldn't spare the child any more. She had said it uneasily, without meeting Amoret's eye. . . . There was always work to be done, from sun-up until bedtime. There was soap to be made, an evil-smelling task, but as necessary as godliness itself. Mr. Adams made it the first time, and after that Amoret kept up the supply for both cabins.

The great yawning maw of a fireplace had to be tended night and day, for fear the fire would be lost. That had happened twice, and waking in the cold house, Stephen had had to run down their hill and up to Joel Adams' house to borrow a shovelful of live coals, for they had no striking lucifers out here in the wilderness.

Joel Adams had showed him how to light a fire by a most dramatic means, if necessary, but this Amoret didn't enjoy. Joel put some powder in the pan of Stephen's flintlock rifle, held a bit of cotton beside it and then pulled the trigger. A spark from the flint ignited the powder, leaped to the cotton and was quickly conveyed to some of the rather scarce paper waiting in the fireplace. But the best way of being sure of warmth, such as it was, during the bitter days of winter, was to keep the fire banked or burning round and round the clock.

Amoret collected the wood ashes and put them into a large wooden trough Joel built for her soap-making. She poured boiling water over the ashes for a strong solution of potash, and boiled and boiled, until there was only about a third of the solution left, such an angry caustic brew that even a drop splashed on a finger took off the skin instantly. All the fat and pig entrails they could accumulate went into this liquid and simmered until the whole became a grayish slimy mass. It was called soft soap, and it bore little resemblance to the exquisite scented tablets imported from France, with which Amoret had associated before this winter. But it was strong-muscled soap, and it scoured relentlessly, tolerating no back talk from dirt on any surface.

She learned a new vocabulary with the new work, so that before winter had gripped its cold fist around the earth, she talked glibly about leaching the lye and dipping the candles, and she knew that boneset would "break the ager," and that pennyroyal would sweat out the fever.

She knit Stephen a pair of galluses from some woolen yarn Opal gave her and she forgot that a lady never mentioned men's trousers. Now she familiarly called them breeches, and often had a pair of Stephen's straddling her own linsey-woolsey lap while she affixed a patch. She traded Opal a petticoat for a voluminous outer garment called a wammus, which the neighbor men found very convenient. It was an ample woolen wrap-around, held snug by a belt, and a button at the

throat. The space inside around the wearer's body was like a vast sack for carrying prairie chickens, or squirrels, in case the man of the house happened to be able to shoot some game on the way home. Stephen haughtily scorned it at first, then one day he put it on for a bitter joke, and found it very practical.

As the months of her pregnancy had progressed and she had outgrown her dainty Philadelphia clothes, she herself had adopted the homely working dress of the other prairie women, called a frockslip. This was a straight shift of brown tow linen to be slipped over the head and gathered at the neck with a puckering string.

She knew how to make what Mr. Adams said was the best lye hominy he had ever eaten, and to brew delicate sassafras tea and sage tea. She poured it as daintily from the common earthen pot as if she were serving it from priceless silver in her own old drawing room, with Mrs. Durkee standing behind her ready to pass it to ladies whose liveried carriages waited in a glitter of paint and brass in the huge graveled plaza at Wide Acres.

Joel Adams was always enormously encouraging about what she cooked for their noonday dinner, which the three of them ate together. Stephen ate the pork and cabbage, or corn dumplings and squirrel, very glumly. But Mr. Adams always said it was a mystery to him how she knew how to cook so good.

"... without you didn't learn when you was a young'un, ma'am," he sometimes added, in the interest of honesty.

Often he grew quite lyrical about her cooking.

"Why, I've seen women cook all their lives and never give food the touch you give it, ma'am," he said. "But of course those were mean-hearted women to begin with. Cookin' depends on how a woman loves her family . . . and the stranger within her gates . . . I reckon I could taste a woman's cooking and tell pretty plain whether she was happy or disheartened . . . whether she loved her man and her young'uns, or was just dragging herself through her life because she couldn't get out of it."

Amoret stopped her stirring to listen, and the spoon held in her hand seemed to listen also.

Stephen broke in, good-naturedly pulling Joel's leg. "Says so in the Bible, I suppose!"

"Matter of truth, it does," Joel said, and he picked up Tobias' old book from the sideboard where Amoret kept it handy and turned the pages carefully until he found the place in the Book of Proverbs. He read it caressingly, only glancing at the page occasionally.

"The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil."

"How beautiful!" Amoret cried, and came and watched the words over his elbow as he held the book.

"She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar."

Stephen said, "You read that as if you knew it."

"I learned it by heart," Joel said. "It keeps me from being lonesome until I find my own woman." He turned back to the book and went on reading.

"She considereth a field and buyeth it; with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. . . . She perceiveth that her merchandise is good. . . ."

"Does it say that?" Stephen asked, interested in spite of himself. "That's quite a revolutionary picture of woman. Isn't she invading her husband's province . . . appraising land and then buying it? . . . merchandise and vineyards? Is that where women belong in that world inside your Bible? No wonder religion usually ruins a woman for anything else."

"You don't think that, Stephen!" Amoret cried in horror.

"Of course I think it," he said. "Women were made for love. They weren't made to argue theology. . . ."

"Neither were men," Joel Adams said with a grin. "That's the devil's doing . . . keeping people arguing with each other instead of listening to God in their thoughts."

Stephen brushed this aside impatiently; he knew nothing about God, but he was an authority on women. "Women were made to be taken care of. Their rightful work is to give

pleasure and happiness to men . . . they weren't made to stand equal beside men."

"You're right there," Joel Adams said. "They were made to go a step ahead of men . . . because they see farther and have more courage. . . . But you're not interested in my ideas . . . listen to what the Book says: 'Her candle goeth not out by night . . .'"

Amoret glanced timidly at Stephen, expecting to see him annoyed, but to her surprise he had turned away his face, and there was a look of awe upon it.

"That's true," he said in a boyish mumble. "'Her candle goeth not out by night. . . .' *My* candle went out many times, but hers . . ." She flew to him and put her arms around his hard body, because he seldom spoke like this.

Mr. Adams, embarrassed by the intimacy which he had uncovered, went back to the reading.

"She stretcheth out her hand to the poor. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet."

The two others listened to the gentle portrait the preacher was painting with the fine strokes of his voice.

"Strength and honour are her clothing . . . in her tongue is the law of kindness . . . Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her . . ."

Stephen broke out now with a hearty, happy laugh, "There, you see! I'm in it too! They even have me in your Bible . . . 'her husband praiseth her.'" He pulled out his stool and sat down at the table, playfully banging his wooden piggin on the tow linen cloth.

"With such an ideal as that, no wonder you are a bachelor, Mr. Adams," he said after a moment.

Joel Adams sat down with peculiar, lonely dignity. "I shall not always be a bachelor. I know better every day that I must find a wife for my heart, and my home."

"Good," Stephen said shortly, tired now of the subject, and the tension that had crept into it.

Amoret turned to the dishing up, saying nothing at all. She was trying to picture what kind of woman would be good enough to be the wife of Joel Adams. Her usually nimble imagination failed her here, for try as she would, she could not imagine a single feature . . . not her hair, not her voice, not her age. Her imagination refused the task entirely. . . .

(2)

Joel had ingenuous little devices for bringing over food to the Phelps' cabin. Usually it happened that he brought it precisely on the days when Amoret didn't know what on earth they would eat, when their own meager provisions from the Mount Hollow store had run low, and Stephen had been too occupied with building the mill to take any time for hunting. He usually brought the food with an apology. "I hate to impose on you, ma'am," he would say. "But would it burden you too much to cook up this fresh venison that was brung me last week by the Junham family? Been sick, and now they're well again and they want to say Thank-God to somebody. Happens there ain't nobody at hand, except me." He was always shy as a boy when he had to explain about the kindness of others to him. Kindness from him was as natural as breathing, but when anyone wanted to point back that warm ray in his direction, he was touched and disconcerted.

"Happened there wasn't anybody at hand but you when the work had to be done, Joel," Stephen said once with a burst of rare affection for this strange hired man of his. "I hear about all your good deeds every time I go down to Mount Hollow. Be a very ungrateful town if they didn't bring you something when they're well, for all you do for them when they're sick."

"Well, anyway . . . if Mrs. Phelps would be so kind as to cook me some venison (or fish, or possum, or whatever delicacy he had brought in his creel woven of white oak splints), I'd be much obliged."

But even Joel's gifts from the villagers had dropped off by late spring, when little Stevie was two months old. Amoret might not have realized it, or noticed it, if she hadn't had an unpleasant moment in the Mount Hollow dry-goods store. She had gone to buy some fine white wool which she had

heard the Hubbard Express Company of Chicago had brought in.

Stephen had driven her down to Mount Hollow, where he was going to talk to some men about coming to work a few days on the grist mill which was nearly finished, and would certainly be running by the time the neighbors' corn was ready for grinding.

"I'm going to buy honey and coffee . . . if there has been any coffee shipped in . . ." Amoret said happily, "and you are going to have some new tobacco, darling."

"Have you any money left from the last shopping?" Stephen asked, indulgently. "I don't imagine so. I have an idea you take care that the money and the purchases all come out even."

"I don't *think* I have any money," Amoret said. "But Mr. Twicker will put it on our account."

Stephen scowled, as he often did when they were speaking about money. She understood that about him; he enjoyed the liberty money can give if there is enough of it, but he detested the petty little twisting that the mind must do when there is not adequate money to free its plans and let them fly toward a vast horizon. Stephen would always be crippled by smallness of money. Stephen was a big man who had to have big things around him. . . .

When she reached the store of Twicker and Dane, she was delighted to see that there were several other women shopping this morning. They spoke to her rather stiffly, and turned back to what they were doing. Her impulse was to run up to them and embrace them, out of sheer pleasure at seeing another woman. But she remembered that these prairie people were sometimes very formal in their shyness. They "jest had to warm to each other," they said. So she spoke only their names, "Good morning, Mrs. Burden . . . Good morning, Mrs. Peters . . ." and turned a bit vaguely to the dress-goods counter. Mr. Arzie Dane was behind that counter, tugging at some bolts of flannel, and rearranging the reels of velvet ribbon which everybody admired but nobody bought. He lifted one shaggy eyebrow in acknowledgment of her speaking to him, and then turned his back on her with a great bustle of being busy.

"I wanted to see some white wool suitable for an infant," she said. "I suppose you've heard that we have a fine new son

out at our house." She knew she had said this the last time she was in the store, but that was the accepted opening remark for a good married woman who has just performed one of her principal springtime functions.

"I did hear it," he said over his shoulder, and went on pulling out black calico and pushing in red merino.

"You know, I'd like to have a length of really lovely sprigged muslin . . . yards and yards of it . . . to make up into a ruffled tea gown," Amoret said with impetuous folly.

"We wouldn't have any such of a thing," he said glumly. "And if we did, I reckon it would be pretty expensive, Mrs. Phelps."

"Of course it would," she said frivolously. "That's why I'd like to have it. Just once . . . just to see how it felt to buy something extravagant. . . ." He looked at her then, his full round face surging with resentment.

"I was only making believe," she said quickly. "What I do want, Mr. Dane, is some sensible plaid gingham. I'm going to make Emily Larsen a dress for her birthday. I'll need six yards . . . please show me that blue and red plaid . . . the third one from the top."

He got it down reluctantly, but he did not open the bolt from its salmon-colored paper wrapping. He shifted from foot to foot, not meeting her eyes. The store was very quiet. The other customers had drawn into a tight little snarl of listening down at the opposite end of the room. Several of them had twisted their faces around to watch her; they had their eyes buttoned up to mere slits, as if to keep their malice from dribbling out. Surely she was imagining all this . . . they were her *friends!*

Arzie Dane was the most uncomfortable person in the store. He was coughing and sputtering, and roping his angry eye around the place, hoping he could lasso some way of escape. This was Twicker's morning to be at the piece-goods counter, but the old bugger had stepped out when he saw Mrs. Phelps coming in.

"I'll take six yards of the gingham," Amoret was saying firmly, her cheeks bright with hurt pride. "And then I'd like to have some coffee, if you have any, Mr. Dane . . . and some . . ."

Dane cleared his throat ominously. His expression cowered behind his big moustache, but there was no way of avoiding

what he had to do. The neighbors were listening, and he knew what they expected of him.

"Sorry, Miz Phelps . . . but I've got to have cash this time."

"Cash? Why . . ."

"Sorry," he mumbled again. "I got my own bills to pay, you know."

"Why, of course," Amoret said. "My husband. . . ." Her throat went utterly dry and failed her. She had a quaking vision of catastrophe . . . the household things they needed, the provisions . . . and Stephen's face, shamed and angry. . . .

Mr. Dane glanced miserably at her, and both their faces looked like people drowning in rapids. He said to himself, "By God! If those women weren't in the store I wouldn't be doing this. It's my store, ain't it? . . . I kin do what I please with my stock. . . ."

But the women were undeniably in the store; their listening spread an ugly smell throughout the atmosphere. The minute the door was closed on this pore little thing, their voices would rise up in raucous cawing like crows.

At last he said in a tremendous blurt, much louder than he had intended, "I reckon you and Mr. Phelps will have to use up some of your savings, Miz Phelps."

"Why, yes . . . I suppose we will," Amoret stammered.

"Twicker and Dane gives credit willing enough," he said truculently, "if it is to help people out. But them that has money ought to spend it, stead of tryin' to git what they can out of neighbors. . . ."

"Why, yes, of course," Amoret said. It must be only some mistake. Stephen had probably just forgotten to pay his bill . . . he needed every dollar they had to buy materials and labor for the grist mill. He was trying his best to sell some of the land so that he would have more ready money to work with. He had even written back to Philadelphia to see if Stanton Purvis might not find someone to buy a piece of it. The town *must* understand him. They must see how hard he was working, how gallantly he had taken hold of this impossible situation. . . . She turned and plunged blindly out of the store, the soles of her feet warm with a blush of shame. She knew she was a coward, but if they could not *see*, she couldn't explain.

The first tears of self-pity for them both which she had ever shed, were stinging at the backs of her eyeballs. The squalid, drunken mud road which they crazily called a street, swam before her eyes, and homesickness engulfed her. The cruel brown bareness of the frame buildings, the hitching posts and the horses, the work-marked people in their ungainly homemade clothes, the treelessness and gracelessness of the whole town suddenly surged over her with almost physical nausea. She fought back the tears, biting her lips so she wouldn't gulp with sobs. She held her ugly gray shawl which she wore because everyone else wore one, around her tightly, and ran as fast as she could down to their own wagon, tied between two others. She clambered up on the seat, and bent over and wept, hidden by her hands and her bonnet.

Not since that afternoon last summer when the whole stagecoach had united in twitting Stephen about the fine city to which he thought he was coming, had she been so bitterly hurt and frightened. She wanted to be out of this . . . she wanted her child to be out of it . . . back where people were carefree and safe and idle . . . this was an ugly dream, but it had been going on for too many months to be only a dream. . . .

She tried to stop herself; she must reduce this last twenty minutes to its proper size. Now it seemed to blot out everything else, the long days of learning and loving, the nights when she had stood enraptured at her cabin door and had looked up into the star-pricked sky, and listened to the silence.

"What're you hearin', Miz Phelps?" little Emily had asked. "You jest listen and listen."

"I'm hearing the voice of God, Emily."

"I can't hear Him," the child whispered. "All I hear is jest nothin'. Nothin' wrapped up in velvet so it won't make no noise. That's what Ma calls it. Ma says it's as quiet as a whisper walkin' around on tiptoe."

A sob like a bubble came up in her, and to her surprise she found it was not a sob but a laugh. A whisper walking around on tiptoe! She straightened up then, and took out her pocket handkerchief, and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Crying . . . sitting here crying when she had everything in the world to be happy about! She shook her whole body as

she would have shaken a naughty child. The idea . . . the very ideal

She heard the voice of Joel Adams, then, reading that beautiful portrait . . . reading the line Stephen had loved, "Her candle goeth not out by night." That was what it said . . . and *this* was what it meant. This homesickness . . . that shameful moment in Twicker and Dane's had been the night, and her candle had nearly gone out . . . but not quite. She blew her nose again, and this time it had a merry, impudent sound.

Somebody was leaping up beside her on the wagon, and Stephen, his eyes very bright, was saying, "Didn't take you long to do your shopping, Mrs. Phelps!"

"No. Didn't take me long," she said, smiling at him as if they had been apart for days instead of minutes. "I changed my mind, Stephen."

"What'd you mean?"

"I looked at the piece goods . . . it was so ugly . . . and the new honey hasn't come in . . . and we've got used to my sassafras tea now . . . I just didn't buy anything." She slipped her hand under his arm and patted him.

"But you were full of things you wanted."

"Until I saw them," she said.

He looked at her carefully. "You've been crying, Amoret." His own eyes were angry; the blacks of the pupils were whittled down to a pinpoint, and sparks were leaping from those pin-points. She must not let him know . . . he would go in there and seize Mr. Dane by the throat and drag him across the piece-goods counter and thrash him in the dust of the street. . . .

"Yes . . . I was crying," she said. "But I'm not crying now."

"What was it? Did somebody say something to you?"

"Of course not!" she said indignantly. Then she thought of an inspired lie. "Suddenly . . . I just hated things in that store . . . the smelliness of it, the calico . . . the dirty old cuspidors on the floor . . . Mr. Dane's fingernails . . . and, and everything." A belated postscript of tears gushed out of her eyes again. She almost believed that *was* what had made her cry. Certainly it was reason valid enough. "I just didn't want anything that came out of their nasty old place. . . ."

"I see," he said gently. "God knows I understand *that* well enough, Amoret. I've wondered a thousand times how you

kept from seeing those things. . . ." He put his arm protectively around her and he drew her close to him. "Let's get away from here. . . ."

"You mean . . . away from Illinois?" she cried in a whisper.

"Oh, no . . . I mean, let's get out of this damned mean-looking town. Mount Hollow . . . I hate the silly sound of that name! They and their crude pioneer jokes."

He was making a healthy bluster about it, being wholesomely angry at the name because it relieved his feelings about other things which he couldn't say.

He picked up the reins, and jerked the horses back so that the wagon could turn around and be free of its unpainted companions at the hitching rail. "Let's get out of this damn town . . . out in the country . . . out to our own fields. . . ."

He knew he was saying something revolutionary, and he went on saying it.

"Not out of Illinois, Mrs. Phelps," he said vehemently. "I couldn't leave Illinois just yet . . . why, I'm building a mill! I've got things planted in my field . . . I couldn't leave now. . . ."

"Oh, Stephen!" she cried, and could say no more, for a boisterous grateful, holy laughing that was coming up into her throat. "Oh, Stephen . . . it's got us both, hasn't it?"

They were out of the village now, facing the long unbroken tableland of earth, mile after mile flat and empty. Empty until you looked closely at it, until you learned to see what was there, waiting for the eyes that *could* see it! May was hovering over the earth, as nebulous as a butterfly trying to make up its mind whether or not spring would light on the land and begin growing into summer. They both drew in great free lungfuls of the scented morning air. Whatever emotion had welled in them lately, now ebbed into the blithe contentment of being with each other, and driving into country where a field belonged to them . . . and a sky, and a cabin, and a child. Where they had wept and loved and had been racked by terrible agony. To a place where their labor had fallen upon the earth like sweat from the brow of that first man in Genesis . . . to ground, where in spite of themselves, their roots had gone down to explore reluctantly, and now had fastened themselves. . . .

"It's got us both all right," Stephen said, and he let out a

big masculine sigh of relief. "But God knows what it will do to us."

"It'll make men of us," Amoret said jauntily, and took off her bonnet and tossed it recklessly into the back of the wagon. Her hair sprang up and seized handfuls of sunlight and tossed them back and forth among her curls; her husband looked at her and felt a flood of pleasure in the sight.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he cried with sudden ardor. "I don't want it to make a man out of you, my pretty."

He stopped the horses, and took her roughly in his arms. Her hands ran to meet him, and flew to his face and then clasped his ears in a way she had which amused him tenderly. Then the hands fell limply, for he was kissing her with much more passion than the hour or the scene seemed to justify. One of the horses peered back inquiringly, and then coyly looked away and whinnied.

"You needn't be afraid," Amoret said demurely, when she could catch her breath. "Not while you have kisses like *that* in you, Mr. Phelps."

They drove on then, and the ugly mean little moment in the store dwindled to unimportance. Dwindled to nothing, and less. "The small end of nothin' with a hole in it like a needle!" as Opal Larsen sometimes said about her own troubles.

Not until Stephen was asleep that night, lying against her, relaxed and huge, but as cozy as little Stevie himself, did Amoret realize that he, too, had emerged from his Mount Hollow errand almost as quickly as she had terminated her own business. He had gone to town with a long list of things he expected to accomplish . . . he was going to ask young Lem James to come out and help with the planting, he was going to try and sell a piece of land to the doctor, he was arranging to have his huge millstones brought by wagon from Saint Louis. . . .

Did it mean anything that he, too, had come flying back to their wagon with black sparks shooting from his eyes?

(3)

It was silly, of course, to read to a baby. That was one reason Amoret did her reading to little Stevie outside the cabin, just

before he went to sleep, lying in his little sugar-trough hammock which they slung over a limb of the walnut tree nearest the field where Stephen was working. A woman . . . and a mother . . . did only sensible things inside her house; when her foolishness and her dreams and her fancies *had* to be indulged, she took them outside, far away from the routine that constricted the days like stern stays confining a lissom body. She ran outside where foolish and beautiful things did not have to be explained to anybody . . . where they could be understood, without words, by babies and insects and the great mothering tree where her child was cradled . . . and the mothering sky where the earth itself was cradled. The neighbors would have been scandalized if they had known how much time little Stevie spent outdoors. Stephen said it was probably not healthy for a child, but the round cheeks of the baby and the contentment of him as he snuggled cozily in his blankets, and his lusty crowing voice chirping like a bird, were the best answer to that.

"He looks like an Indian papoose," Stephen said fondly. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you've given birth to an Indian, Mrs. Phelps."

"Not an Indian . . . but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I've given birth to a Pilgrim Father, Mr. Phelps." That was a joke between her son and herself, and Stephen did not trouble to nick the shell of that nut, for he knew it was just one of the silly little woman-things that Amoret sometimes said. But Amoret and the child knew the point of the joke, for the baby was being brought up, even at this absurd age when he couldn't possibly understand, except with his blood and bones, to appreciate what it means to be an American.

The baby was discovering America. He was absorbing the ardent history which Tobias had briefed in his journal, into that short pre-talking period, when an infant is a mystery that no one can invade. Stevie was living a synopsis of the whole lifetime of his nation, so that when he was a man its meaning would pulse in his blood and shape his loyal deeds . . . and he would not know quite why he felt as fervently as he did. Amoret knew that was absurd woman-reasoning that could not be told to anybody, except a baby and a tree and the sky. . . .

Yet, perhaps it was more than reasoning that took them out

there at the end of this particular day. It might have been some hovering wing of intuition. For if it had not been Amoret's habit to bring the baby and the two books, the Bible and the journal, out into the open when it was time for little Stevie to go to sleep, a worse tragedy might have happened that Friday night.

"I'm half jealous of that little man," Stephen had said that afternoon. "You spend more time with him than you do with me. And what in the world do you talk to him about, my sweet?"

"Things I can't talk to you about," Amoret said.

"What kind of things?" He was intrigued always by what he could not definitely know about her. Intrigued, and slightly exasperated.

"Things you would not consider sensible."

He did not let her see how this kind of answer piqued him. It would not do to let her see.

"Well, enjoy yourself," he muttered in a noncommittal voice. "Bring your baby up the way you want to. Enjoy him while he is a baby. For when he becomes a child, his father is going to take him over. I have some ideas of my own I want to give my son."

This afternoon the hand of the sky caressed the earth with a warm soft subtleness. Amoret opened the little journal and read to herself and the child, the place where Tobias told about fighting for his country. She read the stiff, stilted words from the diary, but what she hoped the baby must be seeing was what she herself saw enacted upon some hidden inner stage of her mind.

The year was 1776, and a woman, who was probably not very different from herself, was crying with fear. Tobias was a nearly grown boy, almost sixteen, and his father (who was probably very much like Stephen), was striding up and down angrily. She could see him as if it were Stephen, smoothing down his black hair, making a mortar and pestle of his two hands and grinding the subject between them impatiently.

"We shall fight . . . there's no doubt about that," he is saying. "We shall certainly fight, Mrs. Phelps."

The woman, who looked like herself, lifts her face from a lace handkerchief, and says, "But we can't win . . . we can't possibly win, so why should we fight? France tried and Spain

tried . . . with all their money and their armies . . . and they couldn't win. Who are we to fight a war with Britain? A handful of people!"

The man turns and looks down at his wife sorrowfully, just as Stephen would look. "People like us can't be counted by the handful. Only by the heartful," he says. "For our hearts are full of freedom. Listen to this . . ." He takes out a pamphlet, and opens it, fluttering through the pages to find the one he wants.

"Listen to this . . . this is what Tom Paine says:

The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a City, Country, a Province, or a Kingdom; but of a Continent . . . of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe . . . Oh ye that love mankind; ye that dare oppose not only tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is over run with oppression. Freedom has been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England has given her warning to depart! Oh! Receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind!

The woman whimpers, "Asylum? What does it mean?"

"It means a safe place," her husband says, "a safe place for mankind to grow up in . . . to come of age. To take the world and what it has to give, and use it for a tool for man's own good purpose. And God's good purpose. That's America's destiny."

Young Tobias, greatly moved, stands up. "Father, I want to fight . . . let me fight too."

The father nods, and touches the boy's shoulder. But the mother is heartbroken.

"We'll lose," she cries. "We'll lose everything we've worked for in this country. We've just begun to build our cities . . . to get life running comfortably and decently . . . a war will make us so poor and wretched . . . the British will come stamping through our country . . . and afterwards, they'll punish us . . . they'll take our trade away from us, and put worse taxes on us . . . we'll lose everything we've gained."

The boy listens to what she said, and then he looks to his father for the answer.

"We'll lose what we were *born* for, if we don't fight for it," the father says quietly.

Then Amoret seemed to see that old face of Tobias which she loved so well, looking down at her, and she heard that tired old voice saying, "But we didn't lose. Lafayette said we won only by a miracle. . . ."

She looked down at the baby; its sweet dazed eyes seemed to be listening.

"Only by a miracle, Stevie!" she repeated. "Of course it was by a miracle. Just as it is a miracle that your father has fallen in love with this land that he hated so much. You can doubt the things men accomplish, darling," she said yearningly, "but never doubt what God does!"

She turned the pages of the journal again. She knew it now almost by heart for she had read it many times. She loved reading it, and each time the words Tobias had written seemed to fade, and in their place came the living image of the people Tobias talked about, amplified and rounded. He knew people like their neighbors here . . . these were the very men he wrote about . . . men like Elk Larsen . . . and Mr. Adams . . . and even troublemakers like Nat Burden.

A great tide, an invisible tide of God's power and purpose had swept men from Europe across to America, had picked them by deliberate circumstance and then had brought them through the building of this country. Last generation and this, the men resembled each other just as this backwoods resembled the original wilderness. That strain of men would go on from generation to generation. Some day the wilderness would all be built, but the common men with the vision in their minds would always be pushing out to new frontiers. Not forests, some day, but frontiers of the spirit . . . That was what Tobias had seen; that was the heritage he had wanted to leave to his children. That was what her son had inherited . . . this dream of man working with God to build a new world out of the old misused earth.

There was a place . . . yes, here it was. She read the words Tobias had written:

. . . later, when the Constitution was written there was the same talk about God. The commonest laborer, whether or not he could read or write, felt able to draw up the Constitution. Freedom was everybody's business. . . .

The page dissolved then, and she saw a group of farmers in a blacksmith shop . . . just such a noisy lively shop as the one in Mount Hollow. They are laughing and joking while they wait for their horses to be shod. Once she could not have guessed what kind of talk there was, simple jokes smelling of stables and earth and kitchens . . . yes, and even bedrooms. Crude jokes . . . but not offensive to a woman whole-souled enough to understand the men who made them.

A wave of seriousness has spread through the group, and one man says, "Jake, here, has tried his hand at writing a Constitution. Says he's going to send it by post to Benjamin Franklin."

"Let's hear it, Jake." They sit down on kegs; their heads cocked ready to listen, just as Amoret had seen them cocked on the canal boat when Stephen had talked. Jake stops what he is doing, rather bashfully, and wipes off his hands on his leather apron.

"It ain't much," he says modestly, but you could see he thought it was a great deal. He unfolds a paper and reads, stumbling over the words in his earnestness.

We do not need any Goviner but the Goviner of the Universe, and under Him a States Ginerl to Consult with the wrest of the United States for the good of the whole.

He folds the paper and looks up timidly. The others are surprised, expecting more.

"That all?"

"What else is there to say?"

"Yep. Guess that about covers it, Jake. Goviner of the Universe, and the Good of All," one repeats thoughtfully.

"But I reckon them statesmen down in Philadelphia will make a heap more work of it than Jake here did."

Then Tobias described the amount of "work" the Founding Fathers *had* made of it. He pictured the small anteroom outside the large hall where the Fathers were gathered to draw up the Constitution, and he told about a friend of his who was an officer standing guard outside the closed door. An impractical man, but a good one, Tobias said, by the name of Richard Monks. He allowed Tobias to come down one day and peep through the door while the work was going on.

"Five weeks they've hemmed and hawed in there," Richard

Monks had told him. "They tell me not a single word has been written yet."

"The East is suspicious of the West," Tobias said. "The little states are scared the big ones will get power into their hands. Every state is working for itself . . . they must learn to work together."

"That's right," Richard Monks had agreed. "The farmers are afraid of the manufacturers . . . they think they will bring in a lot of paupers and give them votes."

"Looks as if they'll never agree. Too many points of view," young Tobias had believed. "Might as well give up."

Richard Monks said, quite confidentially, "I heard this morning that if they don't get something written down by tonight, they *will* give up! Maybe states united is just a dream after all . . . maybe it just isn't possible."

But inside the room, something is happening. Benjamin Franklin, the oldest of the fifty-five delegates, is rising and addressing George Washington, President of the convention.

"We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of government . . . and we have viewed modern states all around Europe, but find none of their constitutions suitable for our circumstances . . . how has it happened, sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understandings?" he asks. President Washington acknowledges his question and motions for him to proceed.

"I have lived, sir, a long time," Franklin says, "and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of men."

Some of the other delegates lean forward then, saying, "Hear . . . hear . . ."

Franklin continues in his rich gentle voice, "If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"

Several of the delegates stir impatiently, looking wisely at each other and rolling up their eyes in sarcastic annoyance.

"I believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel." An elegantly dressed man arises, and the eye-rollers look pleased.

"Mr. President."

"The chair recognizes Alexander Hamilton. Proceed, sir."

"I think the gentlemen will agree we have had enough of outside interference." He lets this humorous reference fully sink in, then he says, obviously enjoying his wit, "I maintain we can accomplish our purpose without invoking *foreign aid!*"

Several of the unreligious members titter delightedly. But Benjamin Franklin ignores the interruption and continues calmly, "We have been assured, sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this, and I, therefore, beg leave to move:

"That hereafter prayers be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business."

Then Tobias had written in his journal: "So God himself attended the Constitutional Convention in the heart of a man."

Amoret came back to herself with a bump. From the field Stephen was calling her. The child was fast asleep.

"Yes . . . I'm coming," she cried guiltily.

She pulled the lace cover which she had made from the overskirt of her best yellow ballgown snugly over the hammock, so that no Illinois fly could annoy her little Stevie, and ran out to the long-shadowed field where Stephen was working. Her blood was tingling with what she had been thinking.

She felt that no task she was ever called upon to do out here was too small or unimportant, to contribute something to this destiny to which she was dedicated. Clear-eyed courageous men had given the country to them, and it was not incongruous to imagine that a nineteen-year-old mother on an obscure Illinois farm scattering seed with her husband could be a partner in the building. Anyone who saw the vision . . . however small and feeble and untrained were the hands that implemented the vision . . . had a part.

In March, when she was busy giving birth to Stevie, the new field had been ploughed and harrowed several times so that it would be loose and mellow to receive the delicate roots of the corn and welcome them deeply. Stephen had ploughed from north to south fine furrows about a yard apart; then he had intersected these with other furrows, and in the corners of each resulting yard-wide square he had dropped four precious corn kernels, and had tamped them

down with his hoe. Now the field was patterned geometrically with strong young blades, and it was time to plant vegetables between them. They would put in kidney beans tonight, to climb up on the sturdy stalks of the corn. Melons and pumpkins had already been planted; by the time the corn was ripe, about the beginning of October, they would have harvested next year's food.

They would let some of the corn stand uncut throughout the winter, to be their animals' meat as they needed it, both fodder and grain. Last winter they had had only Joel Adams' unreaped field. The cattle, even in the depth of the winter, had been turned out to pasture in the brittle, blowing winter hay, but they had made out all right. She was thinking about this, and the fierce, almost merciless way Nature makes her children tough and strong and able . . . unless hardship kills them entirely . . . when suddenly her eye caught something it could not quite believe.

The silhouette of the cabin was almost purple in the setting sun's gold. *A scarlet-orange plume was blowing from one window.* Her mind insisted that what she saw was only a reflection of the last gleam of the sun. But even as she insisted, she knew it was not a reflection. It was fire. . . .

Stephen saw it almost at the same instant, or perhaps he read it in the horror on her face.

"The house! . . . Good God! . . ." he cried, and dropped his hoe. A long streamer was blowing now from the window. It fluttered up against the roof and was captured and held there. Then it raced along toward the chimney, dancing crazily across the roof-tree. A new flame spurted from the other window, and seemed to be looking for its brother blaze. Locating that, it rushed up beside it, and the two of them embraced and became one enveloping shroud.

Amoret ran toward the tree where little Stevie was sleeping in his hammock, then she realized that the tree was the safest distance from the house.

"Leave him there!" Stephen cried to her. "You come and help me get some water. . . ." The whole house was a bonfire now, chuckling and writhing in a merriment of destruction.

"I can't get near enough to find the pails," Stephen gasped huskily. "Unless Joel's left some at the well."

The pails were pitifully inadequate, but Amoret and Ste-

phen tore up and down the hill nevertheless, splashing handfuls of water on the fire. They were both sobbing and breathless, and Stephen was cursing and muttering. But Amoret prayed in frightened gasps.

A man was running through their woods from one tree trunk to another, but in their frenzy they did not see him. He got into a wagon he had hidden in a thick clump, and then came driving out along the road toward them, as if he just happened to be passing. The house was a roaring, jiggling crackle of noise and blaze now, for the puncheon boards were burning, and the heavy logs were beginning to catch.

"Thank God the baby wasn't in it! . . ." Stephen said. Amoret said nothing aloud, but her heart was on its knees with gratitude to God.

Long after darkness fell, they fought to save the logs of the house, but it was a hopeless battle. So lost were Stephen and Amoret in the fray that they did not even realize that one by one all the families of the neighborhood came running up their hill, drawn by the blaze against the prairie sky. Unreal, nameless silhouettes they all seemed to each other, sobbing and breathless as they ran, and dashed water, and flailed at the blaze with soaked blankets. But the dancing crimson beast was too agile for them to kill. It would seem that they had dismembered one limb of the satanic chuckling monster, then he would fling out another long arm of flame and wrap it around some precious possession . . . the smoke house, the beloved trees, the well itself.

Somehow they managed to save everything except the house. By the time nothing of that was left except the crooked stone chimney Stephen had built, their hilltop was almost as filled with neighbors as it had been the night of the house-raising. But although the crowd was the same, the spirit of the crowd was utterly foreign to the innocent merry-making of that night.

Heaps of rosy embers on the ground lighted the brutal scene like crude footlights. On one side of this improvised stage stood the three of them, Stephen, Amoret, and Joel, tragic and still, with no breath left even to console each other. Stephen's hair was wild, and his eyebrows were singed from his face. Joel Adams, white and weary and limp-looking, had turned his back, and the outline of light lay along his strong shoulders and showed them bowed and beaten. Amo-

ret, her face lifted and stunned-looking, was holding the still-sleeping Stevie close to her breast, like a woman in an allegory.

Grouped on the other side of the hill, silenced yet curiously menacing in the flickering, melodramatic darkness, huddled all the neighbors. Amoret's knees were trembling so that she could barely stand; her clothes had the acrid pungent smell of fire about them, and one of her hands, she had just begun to realize, had a burn across the wrist where a flaming fragment must have fallen.

"I don't see how it could have started," she kept saying. "I just don't see how a fire like that could *happen*."

Neither of the men answered her. Stephen was walking around like a man in a dream, beating at the ashes with a shovel, as if beating were somehow a relief.

A woman's voice which they couldn't really identify because of the disfigurement of cruelty that twisted it, flew up out of the crowd and plucked at their ears like a tormenting vulture.

"What you all goin' do *now*, Miz Phelps? I suppose you'll have to go back where you come from." There was a crackle of malicious merriment in the ugly old voice. But Amoret thought she couldn't possibly be hearing that. . . .

"We can't go back," she said. "This is our home now . . . this is all we had in the world, my husband and I. What *will* we do . . . ?"

"I guess you'll have to *hire* some of us to raise you up a new house," a man said. They could identify that voice; it was Lem James. "I guess you'll have to pay us decent Eastern wages for our work."

"Or maybe Mr. Phelps might send East for some of them fancy carpenters he was tellin' about," Nat Burden said jovially.

"But . . . but . . ." Amoret was faltering. Stephen said in an angry undertone, "Don't talk to them, Amoret . . . Let it alone. Don't argue about it."

A woman's voice nagged. "You probably let your supper fire get out of hand, Miz Phelps. Probably your own carelessness. Educated people know all about some things, but they don't know about others."

Another woman said in a whine, "Takes more than money to make people smart."

"What are they talking about?" Amoret cried to Joel Adams. "Something terrible has happened . . . It's worse than just the fire . . . what is it, Mr. Adams?"

Joel Adams made no reply, but he strode over to the murmuring knot of townspeople and spoke out loud and angrily:

"What is this thing, anyway?" he cried. "What have you done here tonight?"

The crowd stood silent, then Lem James muttered gruffly, "We ain't done a thing, Mr. Adams. Didn't we come up here and try to help put out the fire?"

Mr. Twicker, the storekeeper, said, "Mr. Adams . . . why don't you ask Nat Burden . . ."

But Nat Burden himself said impudently, "Seems too bad such a fine house burned down, Mr. Adams. Almost like it was our *own* house burned down, you might say. On account we built it. It kind of belonged to us in a way, didn't it?"

"No, it didn't," Joel Adams said. "We gave it to the Phelpses with no strings tied to it. Same way the neighbors gave other raisings. There's something here I don't like. . . ."

Elk Larsen stepped out then from the crowd. "Something here I don't like either, Mr. Adams," he said. "Nat Burden's been trying to stir up trouble fer the last two months or more. He's got somethin' on his own conscience, and that makes him look for wrong in other people . . . I kin see it now, and I blame myself that I ain't done nothin' about it afore this. I blame myself I didn't keep it from happenin' like it did."

Elk turned to Amoret then and spoke with a tremble of kindness in his voice, "You'll come back to our house, Miz Phelps. There was plenty of room for you once, and there still is. Some people judge everything they see going on outside, by the dirty stuff inside their own skulls. That's what happened here, and I hope you'll just fergit about it."

Opal came over and timidly put her arm around Amoret. "Let me take the baby, Miz Phelps. We'll jest pick up anything you want to carry over to our house, and then tomorrow we'll see what to do."

Stephen said bitterly, "What have we left to carry? What have we left except the baby and our own skins?"

"We have the Bible," Amoret said slowly. "I put that and the journal in the hammock . . . I was reading to the baby before he went to sleep . . . otherwise . . ."

Stephen broke out with sarcastic laughter, "Oh! So we have a Bible left! *That* ought to take us a long way!"

"You'll go a long way, don't you worry," Lem said insolently. "I reckon we jest got you started on your way, Bible or no Bible."

"Stop that!" Joel Adams shouted. "I don't know what kind of talk this is . . . but you stop it, or I'll . . ."

"I'll tell you what the talk is," a man called out indignantly. "We got good reason to think Nat Burden burned this here house down." A tumult of arguing and clamor rose at that, and for a moment it appeared that the whole group was fermenting into a brawl.

"I ain't sayin' I did or I didn't," Nat Burden shrieked above the noise. "But I do say this . . ."

Joel Adams was among them now, whipping them into silence with his bare voice, "You burned down a man's house! And you might have burned his child. . . ."

Then Nat Burden gave himself away completely, "We didn't aim to harm the child, Mr. Adams. We took good care to see the baby was safe outen the house. . . ." He stopped, realizing what he had confessed. Then he brazened it out. "All right . . . I was jes goin' to let on like the fire caught itself . . . but I ain't askeered to tell you what really happened, Joel Adams. Lem and me started the house a-burnin'; that's what happened! We figured the Phelpses didn't have no right to this cabin. They got it outen us on false pretenses . . . makin' out like they didn't have nothin'. . . ."

The crowd would have settled in their own way with the two men. "You ain't got no right to do a thing like that," they cried. "Not likin' people is one thing . . . but burnin' down property!" They seethed with indignation that threatened to become violence. "Ef Mr. Phelps owes the neighbors anything he kin pay, it oughta be brung into court. We got laws out here, same as anywheres else!"

In contradiction to their noisy protest against Nat's and Lem's lawlessness, they would have taken the law into their own hands and punished them then and there, if Joel Adams hadn't prevented it. He put himself between the crowd and the two defiant fire-starters.

"What's back of all this?" he shouted to them. "Speak up . . . or I'll let the neighbors do what they please with you."

Nat said sulkily, "We've stood all we're a-goin' to stand from these here people, with their uppety manners and their fancy clothes and gold watches and one thing and another! Makin' out like they didn't have nothin' and workin' on our sympathies so we come over here and give 'em everythin' we could spare, and built the cabin for 'em . . ."

"We've done it for aplenty of families afore," someone protested.

"But not for people like the Phelps," Nat said. "*They* commenced lordin' it over the rest of us soon's they got what they could outen us. Always makin' out they're better'n we are."

Lem's wife said, "Mister Phelps always tellin' everybody how things oughta be done . . . how things is done in Philadelphia and likea that! And now he's fixin' to build himself up a big millin' business, and gittin' so he'll own the whole town!"

Nat said, "But Mrs. Phelps . . . *she* let the cat outen the bag. My woman heard what she said when she couldn't keep her mouth shet."

"What're you talking about?" Joel Adams cried.

"We're talkin' about that there fortune in the Phelps family. She give it away proper. My woman heard it."

"Yes, and I heard it too," said Mrs. Arzie Dane, with the hare lip. Her voice sounded as flat and tinny as a C-string gone slack. "I heard what she said when she was birthin' the baby. These people is *rich*, I tell you. . . ."

Stephen ran over and stood beside Joel Adams. He was trembling, but his voice was steady.

"I don't see how you people could be so blind," he said. "You must have seen what we've suffered out here . . . how we've worked and gone half-hungry . . . and if you had any sense, you'd know that a grist mill would help the whole town. . . ."

Mrs. Nat Burden became the spokesman then. "We might as well tell you the rest of it, Mr. Phelps," she said.

Arzie Dane said, "Long as we're talking right out in the open, Mr. Phelps, we might as well get out the whole thing."

Mrs. Burden continued, "What we mainly got against you is you've taken our preacher away from us. That woman of yourn with her hussy hair, and them green eyes of hers . . .

she's made a fool of him. And if she hadn't already made a fool of you, you'd a knowed it."

A timid little woman's voice called out, "Mrs. Burden, I don't think you ought to say that. You ain't got no call to say that to Mr. Phelps."

"Preacher's worked himself to the bone for you people, and you don't seem to know why he done it," Mrs. Burden screamed. "Don't think he done it for *you*, Mr. Phelps . . . he done it for that woman of yourn."

The other woman's voice taunted, "Mrs. Burden, you're jest jealous because of Lizzie!"

"I ain't jealous," Mrs. Burden said. "This is righteous indignation, like it says in the Bible. The preacher *was* keepin' company with my sister Lizzie, Mr. Phelps, and he would have married her some day proper and right. But what chance has any prairie woman got alongside a play-actin' little piece like you brought out here?"

Nat Burden reinforced his wife then, "They's sin up on this hilltop. And anybody who's a mind to, kin see it. Anybody but you, Mr. Phelps."

Then Joel Adams did say something. He took two steps across to Nat and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and twisted him around so that the big man went down on his knees sniveling and protesting.

"I'm not going to ask you to apologize for that," he said. "You haven't got decency enough in you to know what an apology is. I've talked and talked to you, Nat Burden. I can tell you things, but I can't give you the capacity to understand them. Well, now I'm going to give you something you *can* understand. You took the law into your hands to-night . . . well, I'm going to take the law into my *fists*, God forgive me."

Some of the crowd said, "That's right, preacher. And ef you don't want to dirty your hands, I'll be happy to help you."

Joel struck the powerful man a blow with his fist that sent him reeling backwards, and then he brushed his hands as if he had touched something unclean.

"I don't know what to say to you, Mr. Phelps," he said, turning to Amoret and Stephen. "I'm ashamed clean down to the bottom of my feet for the way some of the people in this town have acted tonight."

"Not all of us, Mr. Adams," several of them called out. "You ain't got no call to be ashamed of all of us. A lot of us ain't said yet what *we* thought about things."

Joel Adams looked into their honest, indignant faces, and then he turned away and walked down the hill and across to his own cabin. Elk Larsen said, after an awkward moment:

"Well, we might as well git in my wagon and go on along home, Mr. Phelps, sir."

Opal, carrying the baby, followed him, then glancing back and seeing Amoret almost staggering with weariness, she called out, "Come back here, Elk, and relieve Miz Phelps of that there Bible."

But Stephen said, "Give me the Bible! I've taken enough impudence and punishment from that book . . . I'm going to throw it on those embers and let the thing burn up."

"That would be a sin, Mr. Phelps," Elk said soberly. "It purely would."

"If it hadn't been for that book . . . and all that babbling nonsense from my father, and now from my wife . . . the house never would have been destroyed."

"Stephen, please . . ." Amoret said, in tears.

"You've got no call to talk thataway, Mr. Phelps," Elk said gently. "You're just wore out, and that's all there is to it."

"I'm worn out from fighting with that book," Stephen said hotly. "Listen to this . . . roll on the ground and laugh at the humor of this, Elk! You know that fortune the town is talking about?"

"I've heerd about it."

"Well, it's nothing but that Bible . . . and a lot of foolishness my father wrote in a diary . . ."

"I don't rightly know what you mean, Mr. Phelps."

"That's all there is to it . . . that's the fortune they hate me for having. . . ."

He put his hands over his face and laughed uncontrollably. But none of the rest of them made a sound as they climbed into Elk's wagon.

"My father died bankrupt . . . worse than bankrupt. For he left my wife a lot of silly talk . . . and the talk finally burned my house down. That's *my* fortune!"

"You mean you ain't got no money anyplace?"

"Only what I can dig out of this mud with my bare hands," Stephen said.

"Is that so?" Elk breathed, then he squared his shoulders in a big sigh. "Well, I'm right glad to hear it, Mr. Phelps. And as for that Nat Burden, tomorrow I'm going over and settle with him."

"You hush your mouth, Elk," Opal said, as if she were talking to one of her children. "You heerd what the preacher said. They's been enough of men takin' the law in their own hands and tryin' to settle things thataway."

Then she turned back to Stephen. "So you haven't any fortune put away at all? Well, what *are* you going to do?"

Amoret held her breath, waiting for Stephen's answer. It didn't come for a long time. The wagon had begun its noisy swinging plod through the rutted darkness.

"I'm going to keep digging," Stephen said at last, as if to himself. "I'm going to dig harder than ever."

"Good," Elk said. "You'll git farther with the diggin' than you would have with the havin'!"

"I'll show these backwoodsmen . . . I don't know how yet . . . but I'll show them. I'm not licked by a long shot . . . I'll build us a better house than they ever dreamed of." In the darkness he brushed his hand tremblingly across his eyes, and nobody guessed from the sternness of his voice that the back of his hand was wet.

Amoret held the books close. Certainly this was not the moment to say, "The Bible and Tobias' fortune *are* to blame for burning our cabin down! But out of the ashes, you are going to be forced into something better, my Stephen. You'll see . . . you'll see."

It was not the moment for a woman to say anything at all. She slipped her burned wrist under his arm, and patted his hard side. He gave no sign that he felt her hand. He sat apart from her on the wagon seat; never turning his face in the darkness to look at her. It hurt her cruelly to move her wrist, but that was unimportant. The vista she had glimpsed behind Stephen's last words was all that mattered.

"And one more thing," Elk was saying. "I wouldn't pay no mind to that other talk, Mr. Phelps."

"What other talk?" Stephen muttered wearily.

"That talk about Mr. Adams," Elk said with gruff discomfort. "Miz Burden is jest jealous-sore about her sister Lizzie . . ."

"Oh, that," Stephen said impatiently. "That was too dis-

gusting to bother about. I can't even be angry about that nonsense; it's just too ignorant."

"Ignorant?" Mrs. Larsen asked from the back of the wagon where she was sitting on a quilt, holding the sleeping baby in her arms. "In what way, Mr. Phelps?"

"Why, it shows an utter ignorance of human nature," Stephen said.

"It does?" Opal asked enigmatically.

"Why, certainly. Without commenting on the character of my wife, which I would not stoop to doing . . . Joel Adams is only a simple backwoodsman. He knows how uninteresting he would appear to a refined woman. And he knows how much he owes to me."

Opal said shrewdly, rocking back and forth on her skinny shanks, "Yep, I reckon Mr. Adams wouldn't presume to git outen his place." She rocked a few moments in pregnant silence. "And he *is* right much of an angel, Mr. Adams is." She smacked her lips with frank relish. "But you might say he is a kind of a *man* angel. And if he ever did turn hisself to thinkin' steady about a woman . . . I reckon *she'd* jes about . . ."

"Now *you* hesh *your* mouth," Elk said sternly. "What kind of talk is that anyway?"

Opal laughed like an irresponsible girl. "No kind at all," she admitted. "Jes the kind of thinkin' a nice woman shouldn't ever let on she's a-doin', I reckon."

CHAPTER SEVEN

On Sunday morning that week everybody attended the meetin' in the Junhams' house. Usually only a handful came, but today everyone wanted to see what Joel Adams would say, and if the Nat Burdens and Lizzie would dare show their faces.

The whole town enjoyed an orgy of emotion over the events of that Friday night. Not a great deal happened in the dreary, solemn round of work, and food, and slumber, and it was not surprising that they made the most of such drama as they had. Being Americans, they loved to talk, and talking, they loved to argue. This unexpected windfall of excitement furnished them with rich opinion and indignation and controversy. It divided the town sharply, and then, like many cleavages of feeling, it passionately united each faction within itself. Nothing unites like sharp division. For paradoxically enough, human nature loves most ardently when it can find a hate to bind its loyalties together.

By Sunday morning every person in the town knew exactly how everyone else stood in upholding or denouncing Nat Burden and Lem James, and how everyone stood about the preacher, and who was sympathetic to Mr. Phelps even if he was good and rich the way Nat said he was. The blame for Amoret, if you could blame a woman just for being beautiful . . . and the defense of her . . . was a line-up of gender and age. (Though nobody saw that fact very clearly, for biology often plays this blind humorless prank on mentality.) The old and the happy women, and most of the men, idealistically championed Amoret, saying, Preacher hadn't done a bit more for the Phelpses than they themselves would have done if they'd been in his position. The plain and the uncertain women were wrathfully critical about her.

Last year the schoolteacher from Springfield had come out here to hold a four-day debate with Joel Adams on "Naturalism versus Religion." The schoolteacher had tried to prove that the laws of human nature had brought more benefit to civilization than had God's sure finger in men's affairs. That

had stirred up the whole town, but not like this. The feud between the Hotts family and the Macabees which had finally been settled by Ez Horts fighting Oscar Macabee on one side of the river while the whole town gathered and watched from the other, with the stream between preventing any but verbal interference . . . that had been wonderful, but it hadn't provided as much talk as this. There are, after all, only two sides to a feud; but the Phelps' burnin' was a polygon of discussability.

In this situation were dug up and scrutinized the deepest roots of feeling about the West and what it stood for; the rights of men against the importance of property . . . men against money. Those besotted in shiftlessness who had slipped down into lethargy in their unequal struggle of the earth against the farmer, were delighted and vindicated in condemning Stephen as a monster whose industry threatened other men's possession. Those who owned nothing, and so were rebuked by anyone who was earning possessions for himself, were roaringly indignant at Stephen. It was a keen comfort to see him reduced, even lawlessly and temporarily, to a state of homelessness and humiliation. Having nothing themselves, they were eager to prove the virtue of lack, and a consequent menace in the will to possess. Nat and Lem had done the town a service! Might as well warn those Eastern capitalists the West didn't want 'em. But these were in the minority, tattered, unhonored, and quickly silent.

Between these and the upholders of the law, who were indignant against Lem and Nat, a larger group lay. These were the middle-of-the-roaders, who had not actually participated in the vindictive deed, but certainly had not discouraged it.

"I ain't saying' I'm for it or against it," they had said to each other and to their wives. Then some of them had added with an honest twinkle, "It don't seem exactly Christian, I reckon. But it'd be mighty interestin' to see what that smart-Aleck with the education and the big ideas would do about it. Ef something did happen."

But as the talk ebbed and flowed all day Saturday, a quiet soberness had come upon them. Talk was one thing, and burnin' down a good cabin on a man's own land was another. By Saturday night a wave of indignation was sweeping through Mount Hollow, and the townsmen were saying that Nat Burden and Lem James had not only robbed Stephen of

his home, but they had robbed the town itself of its proud dignity of law. The town wasn't sure whether they should reinstate that precarious dignity by further lawlessness in taking the punishment of the fire-starters upon themselves, or whether they should repair the damage by some public gesture of disapproval. Though nobody said so bluntly, it still wasn't so much a matter of ethics as a question of which method would provide more interesting repercussions.

But all that would be decided later. Today was Sunday, a blue-eyed innocent-looking day, and they were all on their way to the meetin', arguing among themselves about how the preacher would handle his side of the affair. For, to everything else that was interesting about the situation, there was added the spicy fillip of jealousy and romance. And romance involving the Preacher! It was deliciously irreverent even to think about it.

Would he preach a sermon against jealousy? Would he get out one of those tongue-rolling Old Testament tirades against coveting your neighbor's wife . . . and read off some of those sizzling places in Leviticus that tell about the wages of fornication and harlotry? Or would he just ignore all that, and give them a good stiff scolding? That's what he likely would do, and he shore could do that when he had a mind to! After all, that was what a preacher was for. You didn't need a preacher to praise you; likely as not you did that yourself. Some people thought a preacher wasn't much good, unless he *did* castigate the soul. The body needs a good soap-scrub once a week or so, and the soul probably requires the same thing. Anyway, it was going to be pretty interesting to see what he would say.

So many townspeople felt the need of religion that morning, there wasn't room for half the congregation in the Junham house. Usually only twelve or fourteen of the faithful turned up on a Sunday morning, but this day most of the town was there, including the Burdens, looking defiant but righteous.

"There seems to have been a great stirring in the town's conscience," Mr. Adams said as the neighbors crowded in. He never let on that he knew what brought them was plain, cussed curiosity. "I propose that we hold our service this morning down in Jed's orchard. May be a good thing to get

ourselves out under God's sky where He can look down on us and see just what kind of a town this here is."

They carried out the one rocking chair for old Mrs. James, Lem's mother, and the benches which Jed had made for the settin' room. The children trooped out and the farmers squatted down stiffly on their heels while their wives primly settled on the hummocks with their Sunday frocks turned up in the back and pulled down demurely in the front.

There were bees in the last of the apple blossoms, and a meadowlark came and listened awhile to what the preacher had to say, and then tore off a yard of ribbony melody and tossed it down to him and flew away, laughing. Joel looked at him flying, so impudent and free, and said, "Little brother, I agree with you perfectly. There's been too much talk already around here. I'll fly off and follow you, soon as ever I can."

That was the first inkling they had of it. But some of them didn't quite grasp that he meant what he said. But by the end of the meetin', they knew all right.

He began, as he always did, by lining some hymns for them to sing. He had a ragged little hymnbook, but he often spoke lines to them from hymns which were not printed in the book. Describing this to Amoret months ago, Opal had said, "Seems like the whole inside of the preacher is writ over with the words of hymns. All he's got to do is look inside himself and read 'em off."

This morning his words came out quietly, so that everyone had to stop all the tumultuous thinking to hear:

*Oh, he who trusts in spite of blindness,
Can rest upon God's mighty arm. . . .*

The rough, humbled voices of all the people sitting on the grass rose up in the old Neumark hymn; at the end they were hushed, waiting for the preacher to speak the next two lines:

*He dwells in God's own loving-kindness
Protected from all doubt and harm.*

No, he wasn't going to scold them today. He was going to talk about loving-kindness . . . fact is, he was going to make them feel *worse* than if he did scold them!

*If ye feel God's extended hand,
Ye have not builded on the sand . . .*

Well, building on that hill, and then having Nat and Lem burn down the cabin . . . that was certainly building on sand. But what would have made it solid ground, they asked themselves penitently. Well, maybe going frankly and asking Mr. Phelps what his wife had meant by those words of hers, spoken in childbirth delirium. Getting the facts fair and frank, and not listening to Mrs. Arzie Dane and Nat's wife . . . not being so quick to think the worst of people, and letting the worst swell up bigger and bigger until it jest kind of broke out in flames. . . .

They roused themselves from this thinking, and realized that the preacher wasn't continuing with the next stanza. One and all, they looked around then to see what it was that had caused the preacher to stumble and stop. They were sitting in front of him, so they had to screw around and gawp over their shoulders to find what he was seeing. But it was worth doing, all right. For there, coming along across the pasture, was Stephen Phelps himself. Not wearing any fancy clothes now, because he didn't have any left in the world. He was wearing his old field clothes, and they looked the worse for the fire. He had never been to meetin' before, and they knew from one thing and another Opal had said, and things they'd noticed themselves, that he wasn't what you'd call a religious man.

Behind him, dressed in one of Opal's old frocks, came Miz Phelps, carrying her baby. The sight of the three, knowing what had happened to them, made you downright uncomfortable. Made you feel like you had maybe a dash of pepper back of your eyelids. Unless Mr. Phelps was a-comin' over here to break up the meetin' and get off some highfalutin' talk about having the law on Nat Burden, and things like that. Their judgment hung poised, waiting to pounce in either direction depending on what Mr. Phelps had up his sleeve.

But he wasn't saying yet. He sat down quietly on the edge of the crowd, with his face turned toward the preacher. He had a little smile on his lips, and if he was maybe making fun of the preacher in his own mind, well, then . . . Their tentative sympathy congealed in their hearts and turned to a sharp weapon of attack against him. If he was going to be meek was one thing, but if he was independent and full of . . . Opal and Elk and their young'uns came traipsing across the field now, and they sat down around the Phelpses in a pro-

tecting ring. Opal had a splash of peony color on her bony cheeks, and Elk looked fierce, as if maybe he was going to fight somebody after the worshiping.

The preacher turned his face from them and went back to the lining of the next stanza.

Oh, wait on Him with veneration. . . .

He faltered and started the line again, but it broke down at the same place. "We'll sing *Rock of Ages*, which you all know," he said sternly. "I cannot recall the Neumark hymn." It was the first time such a thing had ever happened.

They sang lustily now; throwing up a wide strong wall of sound to hide the curiosity and excitement that they couldn't help feeling. Church isn't the place for thinking about it, they were telling themselves in their various ways. But just wait until after church. . . . When they finished that hymn, Mr. Adams started another. Seemed almost as if he was just putting off the sermon until he could get a-hold of himself. He didn't do any more lining. All the hymns he picked out were ones everybody knew. This was unlike him, for he loved to line the songs, and sometimes he was guilty of fitting made-up, new words to familiar old music, if there was something special he wanted his congregation to think about. Sometimes he got downright roguish about the things he put into the hymns. But he would never admit it afterwards. If they mentioned it to him, he'd say, "Why, didn't you ever happen to sing that stanza before?" And somebody would answer, "You know durned good and well we ain't, Mr. Adams."

But today, he was not making up any new words to fit the occasion. Today his countenance was sad and his voice was muffled in velvet. He looked as if he hadn't slept much lately. It made Opal mad to see how he looked.

"Trouble is, the wrong people always feel bad," Opal said in a mumble. "Preacher's got no call to feel bad about the cussedness of this here town . . . you might say he's the on'y one that ain't *ought* to feel like apologizing to God for what people been doin' and thinkin'."

Elk said, "He feels worse because he knows best what God expects from people. He knows it makes God purty discouraged."

He broke off his whispering then, for at last the preacher was beginning. He had taken hold of both his lapels with his big browned fists and was looking up thoughtfully at the sky, as if he were listening for what it was God wanted him to say. You couldn't help loving him for a good man. When you looked at him, you couldn't help loving all the men in the world a little more, even the bad ones that Mr. Adams said weren't really bad, but only acted that way. . . .

He began to talk gently, and he didn't have any scolding in him any place. He wasn't talking like a preacher, in church . . . and of course it wasn't a church, unless you consider the whole open world as a place built to worship God in. He had no fire or brimstone in him . . . and maybe that was because they'd all had enough fire that week. And enough brimstone, too. No. All he had in what he said was gentleness, as if they were children trying to find their way. As if he himself was a child, trying to find *his* way.

He began telling about the footprints that a man leaves when he walks through his life. All kinds of footprints; some you can see, like his children and his house and things like that; and invisible footprints he leaves across other people's lives, the help he gives them, and what he has said . . . his jokes, and the gossip that has hurt people, and the encouragement. . . . A man doesn't think too much about it, Mr. Adams said, but everywhere he passes, he leaves some kind of mark from himself. All those marks added together is what a man means.

Then he began to tell about a man who owned a cow. In a town something like this, it was. He thought a lot of his cow, and he kept her staked out a little piece from the house, where she could eat what she wanted of the grass. Every day when he came home for his dinner . . . (seemed he worked in a blacksmith shop) . . . the first thing he did was fill a big pail of water from the well, and carry it out to the cow. Then one day at the end of August when everything was pretty dried up and gone because there hadn't been much rain that summer, somebody asked him how come he ever found time to keep his path so nice and green. And he looked at it, and sure enough all along the path leading from the house to the pasture, there was grass a-growing, and little flowers blooming. Wherever the man had walked, lugging water to his cow, grass and flowers had sprung up.

They called it the "overflow path," and it reminded the whole town of what can happen when somebody goes out of his way to carry kindness. Some of it is bound to spill over, Mr. Adams said, and you never know what good things may grow up from the spilling.

That was about all he had to say for a sermon. He didn't hammer it at them, but there wasn't a one of them sitting out there under the sky, with the bees humming in the apple trees, that didn't get to wondering what kind of footprints he himself was leaving behind him. There wasn't one. Mrs. Nat Burden just put her skirt up over her face and sobbed, and she didn't care who heard it.

"Nobody means to do harm in the world. That I believe," Mr. Adams said. "But sometimes we just don't know what it is we are doing. We're carrying some kind of pail all the time, and somethin' is spilling over from it . . . and somethin' is growing from the overflow . . . it may be blessing and goodness. Or trouble and suffering." He stopped then, and they sat there quietly, nobody glancing sideways at his neighbor. Everyone was looking inside himself and wondering what kind of an overflow was spilling from his own deeds.

Then on the edge of the crowd, there was a stir, and Mrs. Phelps got up. She was holding her baby, and you could see its little fist waving around as if it were trying to escape from the blanket it was wrapped in. You could imagine that it was like the meadowlark, who had listened awhile and then had flown away to the freedom of the big sky. Mrs. Phelps' bonnet had slipped back from her head, and she had no hand free to straighten it for she was still too new a mother to balance her baby on one arm as experienced mothers do. Her husband, after a quick attempt to keep her from rising, had settled back and was scowling darkly, not meeting anyone's eye, and not looking up at his wife.

"I want to say something," Mrs. Phelps said in a timid little voice. "I don't know whether the congregation is supposed to speak out like this . . . but you've all been my friends, and there's something I ought to tell you that you have a right to know."

She looked quickly at the preacher and waited. At first it seemed he wasn't going to look in her direction, any more than her husband was looking. Then, almost painfully he turned his head and spoke.

"You say what you want to, ma'am," he said. His voice wasn't the preacher's voice now. It had none of the authority in it that his preaching words had; it was really the voice of a rather bashful man, speaking to the wife of his neighbor.

"I wanted to say that what happened to our house . . . wasn't really anybody's fault," Mrs. Phelps said in a rush. "It was just a misunderstanding. If anybody was to blame for it, I guess I'd be to blame," she added. "You see, I've . . . I've given a wrong impression about my husband. He *was* a very wealthy man. . . ." She swallowed now and couldn't seem to go on. Her husband said something to her sharply, and the whole moment was terrible and uncomfortable for everyone.

"But now . . . we have no riches of any kind . . . except what we can make for ourselves. My father-in-law did leave us a fortune. That is true." Now she had lost all her embarrassment, and her self-consciousness, for she was speaking about something that seemed to her much bigger and more important than any little timid woman, or any woman's husband, or the town in which they lived.

"But it was a fortune that all Americans have, if they wish to know it. It is America . . . what it means in the destiny of the world, because it was conceived in men's need for God, and was built upon men's trust in God. That was the fortune he left us . . . he wrote a will so we could understand it . . . and he left us his Bible to build our lives upon." She had forgotten now that this was meetin'. She was talking to them as easily and simply as if she were alone with each of them.

"There was one verse, particularly, he quoted in the codicil to his will," she said. "I've tried and tried to find it in our Bible. It says:

There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing . . .
there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great
riches. . . .

That's the great riches he left us . . . that's the only kind I want us to own . . . that's the fortune I want for my son . . . Mr. Adams, where *is* that verse in the Bible? I just can't find it!"

Joel Adams, too, had forgotten that this was the meetin', and that half the town was sitting there between them listening. He was talking now, only to her.

"Thank you, ma'am, for sayin' what you said just now. As long as you've been so honest about it, not keeping anything back, I might as well tell you that these here people in the town ain't the only ones that thought hard about your husband. Not understanding him, you might say. I been guilty of that myself, ma'am, sometimes. And when you think hard about somebody, you rob yourself. So I thank you, ma'am, for giving me back my good opinion."

There was an awkward stillness then, so quiet you could hear the Phelps' baby yawning in his mother's arms. That brought the Preacher back to where they were.

"About that verse now, ma'am. I think you'll find that is in Proverbs 13." He turned his face back slowly and let his dark brooding eyes sweep over the rest of his congregation.

"I've been here among you people for nearly three years now," he said after a moment. "Sometimes it looked like the work God gave me to do here was gettin' done satisfactory. But this week . . . what's come to light in this town . . . well, that's made me doubt. The Bible says we must judge a tree by its fruits. My fruits in this town are in what you people do. Not what I stand here sayin' to you . . . but what you people do about it . . . And this week . . ."

Mr. Twicker, the storekeeper, said in a husky voice, "You've got no call to think that, Mr. Adams. We've all done things we're ashamed of. But you ain't got no call to take the blame fer us."

The preacher went on as if he had not heard the gruff interruption. "So I made up my mind that it's time I move along to another field. Besides that . . ." He looked down at his big brown hands, and when he saw they were trembling he put them behind him. "Besides that, Mr. Phelps needs that cabin on his land which I been living in. So all in all . . ."

The meeting then dissolved in an uproar of protest. Some of the women burst out in unrestrained crying, and the children hearing this, set up a wailing of their own, not too sure just why, but wishing to be included in the excitement.

"You see what you done!" someone shrilled at the Burdens, huddled together, sharp-faced and frightened. "You fixed it so we got to give up our preacher. He's took the blame on his own shoulders!"

"I didn't aim to start nothin' like this," Nat said helplessly. "I was on'y wantin' to show them people . . ."

"I hope you're satisfied now. What it amounts to, you burned down the preacher's house! That's what you did."

In the excitement everyone had completely forgotten Stephen. He stood off by himself, watching the whole thing with rueful amusement on his face.

"I won't allow Joel to leave," he said confidently to himself. "But he might as well enjoy this little moment of dramatizing himself. I don't know whether it's a good thing or not for him to have such a hold on the town. But anyway, this big furore will just give him more power over them. I guess it doesn't do them any harm. After all, everybody, even these poor dusty wretches, have to have a hero to look up to."

Then he fell to wondering if it would ever be worth his while to make himself their hero. It would be an easy thing to achieve; he'd only have to bring some prosperity and comfort to this bedraggled spot . . . he could win them over easily if he ever gave a damn about doing it. He might go into politics sometime . . . that would be one way of digging himself out of this backwoods . . . The whole trick would be to throw yourself body and soul into it, and stop standing aside and letting your amusement and your differentness show. Being willing to save all the little laughs until the fine last laugh!

So absorbed was he in this unexpected, audacious vision of what might be brought about in this career, that he didn't realize that the whole temper of the crowd had undergone one of its sudden mutations. He didn't realize it until he heard the silence, and saw that Lem James was floundering toward him through an opened aisle in the crowd. Every face was lighted with hungry expectancy, and Lem's face was contorted with gluttonous remorse. The poor beggar looked as if he were going to throw himself on Stephen's chest and burst into tears.

"I jes cain't stand it another minute, Mr. Phelps," he was blubbering. "My conscience give me the tortures . . . and now hearin' what Miz Phelps had to say . . . and the preacher and everything. . . ."

Stephen stretched out his hand and steadied the man, who was reeling in front of him almost as if he were drunk.

"I'm a-goin' to make up every bit of what I lost fer you, sir," he was saying. "I'm a-goin' to come over to your farm two days of every week and work this old hide of mine loose

from my bones, until I make up everything I helped burn up fer you, sir."

"That isn't necessary, Lem," Stephen said, considerably embarrassed by this dripping contriteness. "You just made a mistake, and now everything is cleared up. I'd no idea what you people thought . . ."

"We didn't have no right, no matter what we thought," Lem said. "And I'm a-going to make it up, and you cain't stop me, sir."

Then Nat himself, not to be outdone, came stamping over from his end of the crowd. His face was fiery red, and his sparse tan hair was standing out around his forehead like the straw hair of a scarecrow. In his fist something glittered and dangled, and Stephen thought for one wild moment that it was a revolver. Then he saw what it was.

"Here, Mr. Phelps. You jes take back this gold watch," he blurted out. "Man like me ain't got no right to a gold watch. But I won it, fair and square, no matter what some mean people in this town go around sayin'."

"That was all settled the night of the raising, Nat," Stephen said. "I've never thought any more about it."

"Well, I have," Nat said. "I got so I couldn't take no pleasure in the sight of it. But now . . . well, I'm a-giving it back to you, sir, fer what I did to your house. An' if that don't pay fer it, I'll jest have to work it out some way, the way Lem is. . . ."

He thrust the watch into Stephen's hand, scuffed his dusty paw across his eyes, motioned angrily to his wife and the still-whimpering Lizzie, and stalked off to his wagon.

The whole preposterous bubble of unreality broke now for Stephen, because of the watch which he held in his hand. He looked down at it, and a surge of emotion, compounded of humility and homesickness, rose up in him. He was right when he said he had not thought of it since the night he had given away Tobias' gift; he had refused to think. But now the sight of it, and the words he knew were engraved inside the case brought back to him all the nostalgia and bitterness and love which he had put away. He had the watch in his hands again. He was back where he had started. He had given the watch in exchange for the cabin. Now the cabin was gone, but the watch had come back.

"The best for my son," Tobias had had engraved in the watch. That was what he had expected from the world for his

son. It would have been ironical even to that strange old man to have seen what "best" had come to him. But what was the second line? He couldn't remember, for he had never really grasped what his father was trying to say. He opened the case and looked down at the second line . . . "The best from my son."

What did it mean, anyway? For the first time he understood, and he saw it without anger. It was his father's way of pledging some responsibility, some debt, which he wanted Stephen to owe to the world. . . . And was he paying it?

Against his will he asked himself, and against his will he felt a great shout of affirmation within him. He had not chosen this destiny, God knew; but he was embarked upon it now, and it was wrenching effort out of him which he had never dreamed was possible. The nights when he and Joel had worked on the dam with the flares burning . . . the blind night-plowing when he bumped along behind his horse after the day's work was done . . . and now, born out of an angry challenge, this new intention of his. . . .

He'd show old Tobias! He'd build up a fortune for himself as big as the one his father had expected to leave him. It could be done, and he would do it. He closed his hand around the watch, and slipped it into the pocket of his work breeches.

(2)

Stephen was completely surprised by his encounter with Joel Adams. As soon as the preacher had been able to shake off the clamoring, teary crowd which importunately gathered around him, he walked over to where Stephen was standing, watching the scene.

"I'm glad you saw fitten to come over here this morning, Mr. Phelps," Joel said. "I was going to ride my horse over to Elk's house this afternoon and tell you what my plans are."

"I guess we both had the same thing in our minds. That's really why I came with the rest of the folks this morning. I wanted to see you, Joel. I've got a new plan I wanted to talk to you about."

"You heard what I said in the meeting," Joel looked him frankly in the eye. "I'm moving on, Mr. Phelps. Right away now. I've made arrangements to sleep in the Junhams' house

until I leave, so you can take over that cabin on your land. After all, it belongs to you. . . . About my things you'll find in the cabin . . ."

"Let's don't have any talk about your going away," Stephen said impatiently. "You and I are just beginning to work out something very profitable here with the mill. I'm expecting you to stay on. Matter of fact, if Mrs. Phelps and I do take over your house until we can get our new one built, there's no reason why we shouldn't fix you up a corner of the mill to sleep in. Good thing it was summer when all this craziness happened."

"I've made up my mind," Joel said firmly. "I've finished what I have to do here, and I'm going to move on."

"But where?" cried Stephen. "Where have you a better chance of making something of yourself than right here? You and I work well together. We understand each other. I'm perfectly frank in telling you that you're the only man out here that I feel as if I can talk to."

"I appreciate your saying that, Mr. Phelps," Joel said shyly. "I appreciate that. And you've been more than ordinarily kind to me, lending me your books and things like that."

"As a matter of fact, I imagine you could twist some sort of a moral out of that . . . maybe make a sermon out of it, preacher. . . ." Stephen said with a rueful grin. "The only books I have left are the ones I lent you."

"That's a fact," Joel said. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I wish I'd sent the whole crate of 'em over to your cabin! Isn't there some kind of a Chinese proverb that says the only things you have in heaven are what you gave away on earth?"

"I reckon that's right. In this instance, anyway," the preacher agreed. "Well, I'll always be glad I had a chance to know you. And if I ever get back this way . . ."

"Stop talking like that," Stephen said. "I don't know what your reasons are for deciding you want to go, but the truth is we need you here. I may not be able to pay you much of a salary yet . . ." Then he looked at Joel openly and smiled that winning smile of his. "To be honest about it, Joel . . . I'm going to stop all that big talk of mine about paying you, and having you work for me. I guess that didn't fool anybody but me . . . and it damn near made a fool of me, didn't it?"

Both men were quiet a moment, and Joel thought to him-

self, "If I weren't so blamed bashful, I'd tell that man that's the straightest and finest thing I ever heard anybody admit . . . he's got stuff in him, after all."

Stephen said gruffly, "There's enough here for both of us, Joel. You won't be working for me . . . we'll be partners."

"Thank you, Stephen," Joel said. Both men knew that the speaking of the first name was a tribute which each was paying the other.

"'Phelps and Adams' . . . sounds like a partnership already, doesn't it?" Stephen said enthusiastically.

"It does," Joel admitted. "Words can make a kind of little picture frame which people can easily get caught in. I've noticed that. But you see . . . I'm not trying to amount to anything, as you call it . . . I don't think I ever want to be a big successful man in business . . . I'm a preacher, Stephen."

"Well, all right," Stephen said, "go ahead and be a preacher. That only takes one day out of the week, doesn't it? Why don't we just go on the way we've started? Why do we have to have all this nonsense, just because a couple of ignorant backwoodsmen burned down my house? If it's just a question of where you're going to live . . ."

"It's not exactly that," Joel said slowly. "I don't know as I can explain it to you, but it's clear in my own mind now, and I have to do what it comes to me to do."

Stephen cried out angrily, "And that's to go away . . . to start out somewhere not knowing where you're going . . . leaving everything you've built up here! That's what religion does for you! Sends people out on crazy fools' errands."

"You can call it anything you want to," Joel said with great dignity. "But I've made up my mind. You can use anything that's in my house. . . ." He quickly outlined his assets, his cow and the planted field he had worked for the past two years . . . the furniture he had made with his own hands in the long winter evenings before the Phelps came.

"I'm not in a position yet to buy the things from you," Stephen said gruffly. "You know the situation pretty accurately. My God! a man hasn't any privacy out here . . . everybody knows now that I haven't any money . . ."

"It isn't a question of money," Joel said gently. "You won't owe me anything, Stephen. I want you to use everything I have just like it was your own. But if you can't do that, we'll call it a loan." His voice dwindled away. Then he turned and looked Stephen fairly in the face.

"There's something else," he said slowly. "I didn't tell the townspeople this morning the whole thing."

"No? What'd you mean?"

"Well . . . there's a personal reason besides," Joel mumbled.

"Oh, I see," Stephen said. That could have ended the conversation, for the words Joel had used were the conventional door for closing a subject. But Joel had evidently made up his mind to tell him. He went on almost painfully. "I've got awful fond of you people. You've been like a brother to me . . . and the baby . . . why, I wouldn't think a little tiny baby could get around a man's heart the way Stevie's got around me."

Stephen said nothing.

"I could just go on here year after year, as long as you'd be willing to have me around. I could just get rich, and kind of starve along, picking up the crumbs that fell off of your happiness . . ." Suddenly his voice was trembling, and Stephen saw that he was shaken with emotion.

By golly! the strange fellow *was* fond of them. He had never really stopped to think much about it; he had just taken him for granted, the way you would depend on a fine horse, or appreciate the friendship of your own dog. But something had been happening inside this man. Then, suddenly, he realized that the biggest thing the man was saying was conspicuously omitted from his words. Why, he was telling him that he was in love with Amoret! The poor, blundering, ignorant bumpkin . . . he must know how laughable such emotion was. He saw that, naturally, and he was saying he couldn't bear to be around her any more. It was both annoying and ridiculous. . . .

And yet you had to admire him for the straightforward, decisive way he was handling the situation he had conjured up out of loneliness. Preposterous as the whole thing was, you couldn't help respecting the fellow. . . .

(3)

All through supper, Joel's bluejay kept flying in the window of his cabin looking for him. He heard the voices, and refused to believe that his friend was not present. He came

darting into Stephen's face once, and Stephen had to throw up his arm quickly to guard his eyes.

"I'll have to chase that bird out, if we're going to live here for awhile," he said. "I didn't realize Adams let the thing fly in and out of the house this way."

Amoret sat at the table, watching the blue lightning swoop across the twilight. There seemed something unbearably sad about the little tamed bird whose only way of paying Joel for saving his life was to give himself the bliss of being near him forever.

"I've told him and told him that Mr. Adams isn't here," she said, "but he won't understand. He misses him . . . I think we'll all miss him, Stephen, if he really goes away."

There was much about the cabin that was quaint and distinctive; the owner was uncomfortably present in it, and probably always would be. The simple furniture was very carefully made, with a grace and polish which told that it had grown out of the abundance of time provided by loneliness. On the walls were hand-lettered mottoes, touchingly boyish and naive. The windows in the cabin were bigger than most men chose, for these had been built by a man who loved the outdoors, and needed only a narrow refuge from wind and storm because he lived so contentedly under the wider roof of the sky. Stephen went around, quizzically fingering the possessions, as if he wanted to learn more about this man who had just taken himself out of their existence. He spoke of him already in the past tense, without reservation of praise, as people speak of the dead.

"He was a bigger man than I thought," he said once. And Amoret wanted to say, "Stephen, that's because a bigger man is looking at him now. You've more to see with now, my darling." But she did not say that, for that would have cramped his seeing with resentment.

After supper he went out to take care of the stock and to inspect the wreckage of the house, and to admire the nearly finished mill. But Amoret still sat at the table. The night air was not sweet as it usually was, for there was the black ugliness of charred wood and smoke lingering on the edge of the fragrance. A hurt smell, that would cling to the nostrils a long, long time. But the dimly lighted room with herself and the baby and the bird, quiet and meditative, felt all of one piece, safe and fixed in an invisible firmament. All a trifle sad-

dened and yet not oppressed, for it was as if they knew that this was but a small inch in a wide world not yet fully measured.

"We are like a little family of wise yet stupid things, the baby, the bird, and myself," she said in her thoughts, and over her thoughts stretched a quotation, "For God has given the weak things of this world to put at naught the strong, and foolish things to confound the wise. . . ." They three were the only living things in the room . . . they and the candle-flame. And the flame, too, was part of that family of wise and weak things to which she herself belonged, for it was she who had made the candles that Joel Adams burned in his house. That candle-eye which she had made had watched with him while he read, night after night. It saw his bent head, and the page under his tracing finger. . . .

Her face burned as she remembered that ugly thing Mrs. Nat Burden had said about Mr. Adams. Everyone knew how untrue it was, of course. A good man like Mr. Adams must have to forgive a great many meannesses in people . . . it seemed sometimes as if the very goodness in a man brought out the evil in people. Perhaps that was the plan; perhaps the goodness brought the evil up to the surface of men, so that it might be rooted out of them. If it lay hidden, it did much more harm than when it spoke itself out frankly in a deed. Even the burning down of the house was preferable to the long smoldering hatred which she had felt and had not understood. Now they all knew where they were. Now the truth had been told, and the Phelpses could bask in peace again. Indeed, the two men who had felt the most hatred for them also had the peace of wanting to make amends.

She realized suddenly that her mind had modestly turned itself away from thinking about what Mrs. Nat Burden had said about Mr. Adams. As if he, with all his wisdom and goodness, could be in love with . . . She tried to imagine what kind of wonderful woman he *could* love. But once again, her usually inventive imagination refused to bring up a picture.

When Stephen came back from the mill, he was filled with joviality, for nothing heartened him like the sight of his own work, incredibly visible. He never could quite believe that this unfamiliar manual effort could add up to a building standing solid, to a stream caged and harnessed for work. "I

tell you, Mrs. Phelps, you're going to find yourself one day married to a prosperous mill owner," he said as he came into Joel's cabin. "I've got big plans now . . . I'm going to build a saw mill." He announced it jubilantly and sat down on one of Joel's stools and drew her to stand between his knees. She looked down into his face, so handsome and dark and strong-looking, and traced with one finger a deep new line beside his mouth. He caught her finger and kissed it. She saw its roughness reflected on a fleet frown that passed across his face, and she followed that unwelcome impression and saw it lead to his next words.

"You'll have everything you want . . . I'll buy you not one golden harp, Mrs. Phelps, but a dozen of them some day. And every harp shall have a fitting room to live in. . . ."

"I don't need a harp. I need only what I have now." He scarcely noticed her saying it, for already his mind had plunged back to his own plans.

"Thank God, Joel and I made that dam deep enough and strong enough so that driftwood can go over it easily. We might have made the cribs smaller and lighter for just a grist mill, but somehow we didn't. And the mill building itself. That's set up on pillars filled with stone that are strong enough to hold anything. If I can just get the money to buy an up-and-down saw . . . Well, I'm *going* to get it. I'll borrow it from somewhere, so help me!" She wasn't following him too clearly, but at least it was wonderful to see him enthusiastic and not defeated.

"Funny how strangely things work out," he said. "If I'd been able to keep that miserable cabin for us to live in, we'd have gone along that way for years. But when they burned it down . . . well, I made up my mind I'd show those people I didn't need to have any house *given* to me . . . and then I began wondering where I'd get decent materials . . . and now I see it. We'll build the sawmill and use the trees from our own woods . . . we'll have the finest house in Illinois. And in order to have that house, I'll have built the finest sawmill."

"You mean something good came out of the fire?"

He laughed and drew her closer to him. "Yes, I do mean that," he said. "Last night I thought I would never forgive you because that silly talk of yours had lost us our home. But all day today I've been thinking about the sawmill . . . I've

been seeing how it can be done, and what it will amount to . . . and by God, I believe I owe it all to your silly talking."

But, much as the conceit pleased him, she could not let it rest that way. "Not to my silly talking, Stephen," she said earnestly, completely against his mood.

"To what then, my pet?" he asked, smoothing his lips along her dove-soft inner arm.

"To God," Amoret said. "God works in mysterious ways."

"Oh, please," he said, dropping her arm impatiently. "Let's not have *that* tonight. We've been to church this morning . . . you'll probably never get me there again in my lifetime . . . but let's let that suffice for this day, shall we?"

But she could not fall into his mood; what he had seen and yet had misinterpreted was too important to her to be lost in any easy amorous playfulness.

"Stephen . . . I don't want us to be rich unless we are also . . ." She could not find the words she wished to use.

"Unless we are what?" he prodded gruffly, drawn into discussing it, much against his will.

"Well, I want us to be rich in spiritual things."

"I don't know anything about spiritual things. I only know what I can see . . . what I can work with and make something of. All that invisible nonsense . . . it doesn't mean anything. What does mean something to me is getting enough money together to buy the machinery for the mill. The rest is just talk . . . worth nothing. It blows away like smoke when you try to get your hands on it."

"No," she said angrily. "It's all that endures. The buildings blow away; the machinery rusts and is replaced by newer machinery . . . even the men are replaced by newer men . . . But the good words, and the spiritual meaning behind everything in the world . . . that lasts, Stephen. That kindles life in the people who understand . . . and deeds and decisions spring from it. It's the only power. It stays alive! It's alive right now on that page . . . just as much as the day it was written." She was breathing roughly. He sat back and watched her, brooding between anger and a voluptuous pleasure in her fire, which he intended putting out and rekindling into different fire.

She went over and got the Bible, which they had brought this afternoon when they moved little Stevie's things and their borrowed clothes from the Larsens'. "Let me show you,"

she said passionately, opening the book and then faltering uncertainly. "Where *was* that? . . . I know he said it was in Proverbs . . . Proverbs what?"

"Proverbs 13," Stephen said, laughing at her fierceness.

"Why . . . you remember! How did you remember?" she cried melting with pleasure because between them was the semblance of understanding.

"I remember because I thought how unlucky the number was. Thirteen . . . all my father had left to put in the codicil of his will!"

She rallied above her disappointment at this bitter flippancy, then leafed through the pages eagerly. "Stephen . . . let me read it to you from the book . . . and see what it means . . ."

Then she stopped and almost dropped the book in amazement.

"Stephen!" She cried in a whisper. "Look . . ." She could not speak another word. He leaped up and came over to where she was standing with the eye of the candle winking.

"My God! it's a banknote," he said. It lay between the pages of Tobias' big book, a five-hundred-dollar note. Across the top of the page in the wry old handwriting was written, "You have looked in the right place and have found." Tobias had drawn an arrow down to the seventh verse, which was the one Amoret was seeking.

They were both drenched with weakness; it was as if the old man were in the room with them, as if he had spoken to them, and had handed them this weary, limp banknote, at the very moment when it could mean the turning point in their lives. Amoret was overcome with emotion. But Stephen picked up the note and held it in the light. His hands were trembling, and his face was quivering with what was nearly a sob of surprise and relief and incredulity.

"He put it in when he had scores of them," he said at last. "Never knowing how big this would grow to be."

If Tobias had left it in the usual way, it would have been but a mere drop, blotted up by creditors. Even if it had been in some miraculous way spared from the creditors, it would have vanished in a few weeks in the Philadelphia living. Tobias had put it in the only place where it could possibly be safe. Yet a dozen times, it might have been destroyed. Stephen himself had wanted to lose the Book, over and over.

Only the other night, he had wanted to throw it on the pile of embers. . . .

But something had always protected it. And even now, if Amoret had not insisted upon looking in that book for the verse . . .

"Why, it's the biggest thing in the world to me!" he said almost with reverent drollery. "It makes the whole thing possible!"

He sat down limply, holding the banknote in both hands. His whole body was racked with laughter now. . . . "He would roar, himself, if he knew," he said. "He loved a good joke as much as anybody . . ."

"It isn't a joke," Amoret said. "It was the most serious thing in the world to him, Stephen."

"Nonsense . . . let's be happy about it. You've become such a sobersides out here in the wilderness . . . I think that's the part I hate the worst . . . what this life has done to you. . . ."

She was too earnest to care that he had said something which once would have hurt her deeply. She was far past caring about anything so trivial as her own small feelings and vanities.

"You cannot accept one gift without the other," she said. "He intended you to find the money only because you had come into the book looking for the verse. It was to be an answer to a sincere prayer, Stephen."

He folded the note and put it in his pocket carefully. The watch and the money . . . neither had been there a few hours ago! He patted the pocket triumphantly. He was a self-respecting man of prospects now. His head was spinning with the exhilaration of seeing a way suddenly opened ahead of him. Why, in time, he would have everything again, and now by his own efforts!

Matter of fact, he had riches right now; even the present was not hopeless. Not the least of his treasures was this green-eyed, full-lipped woman an arm's length away! Wanting to talk about spirituality when there was sweet-singing flesh at hand . . . He reached out and touched her and drew her close into the circle of his urgent arms.

"You must tell me about it, Amoret," he said huskily. "Tell me what it means, that verse. How does it go?" He fitted his lips to the hollow under her delicious ear.

"There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing," she said in a soft little voice. He let his lips slip tantalizingly across her throat, and she shivered, then drew herself away from him. She stood apart, and it was as if a circle were drawn around her which he could not trespass.

"There is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches." She finished the quotation, but she was pale, and her green eyes were flashing with an angry fire, because he had attempted to rape her inviolate mind through invading the willing precincts of her love. His head was still bent forward, exactly as it had been when she had taken herself proudly from his grasp. He watched her out of the tops of his eyes, unwilling to understand what he could not help reading in her. But her voice went on clearly, finishing what she had to say . . . giving him every chance to redeem himself before it was too late.

"That's the way Tobias wanted *us* to be, Stephen . . . rich enough to give away everything and still not be poor. Rich the way Mr. Adams is . . ."

The sound of the name was enough. He felt his whole body flame with an anger which he had never before acknowledged. It was as if that body had known from the beginning and had waited patiently for the brain to find the occasion. He took one step across to Amoret and seized her roughly in his arms, and bent her head back and kissed her.

He mimicked her voice insultingly. "The way Mr. Adams is . . . Well, you'll never find me that way, my pet. You're married to a man and not a psalm-singing, weak-kneed . . ."

Before either of them realized it was going to happen, Amoret's hand came up and struck him across the mouth. Their eyes were dilated and angry, the irises sharpened to sparks, the whites glittering as if with frost. Stephen's face was pale, and the mark of Amoret's hand was crimson across it.

Then he kindled to angry, titanic glee . . . "So . . . you want it this way! I can see you're tired of gentleness. You've had enough fancy talking. Now you want something with substance, do you? Well, you shall have it."

He picked her up in his arms, and strode across the room with her. The bluejay, aroused from a windowsill where it had been dozing, swooped once across the bed and circled the room, screaming and protesting in its own helpless way.

"Stephen, please . . . not like this . . ."

The anger and outrage, the bottled-up shame and fury, and now the jealousy and the unwilling admiration . . . all the turmoil of feelings which had been crowded into these last hours, were tingling and crackling along his blood, and there was no stopping. Under everything else was a primitive need to grapple with those things which Amoret held most sacred, to strangle them, if possible, by the very power of his love for her. This defamation was made the more ruthless because of its own inevitable remorse which was the seed within itself. Added to everything else, he felt a savage justice because he was committing this outrage against himself and his love for Amoret in this very room which that other man, who also loved her, had built out of his loneliness. That little woman-mind which Joel thought he knew so well . . . it was a small part of her. There was only one man who had the right to all of her, who could spangle her sky with stars, and stir her depths with waves from a secret sea. . . He heard the sound of sobbing, and he thought, "Let her weep . . . it is part of it. . . ."

Then he realized that it was not Amoret who was weeping. It was himself. She was staring at him out of calm eyes as if she never had seen him before. Her hair lay across her eyes like a golden mask, and under the mask her mouth was cold and unspeakably sad.

"Amoret . . . I didn't mean to do that . . . but the man is in love with you. . . ." She turned her head away from him, as if she did not even hear him.

And thus it was that her second child was conceived.

PART III

*When from the lips of Truth one mighty breath
Shall, like a whirlwind, scatter in its breeze
The whole dark pile of human mockeries;
Then shall the reign of Mind commence on earth.*

Lalla Rookh, THOMAS MOORE

CHAPTER ONE

The next years passed quickly. Children served as calendars; without their growing, it might have been difficult to remember how much time was passing. But their height kept the record visible. The lusty growing of the country itself kept pace with the children. You passed through towns and saw only a huddle of cabins, and the next time your business took you that way, there was a plank or brick-paved sidewalk and a respectable row of two- and three-storied commercial buildings, with milliners and jewelers and newspapers all flourishing.

Towns which had been only a pretentious name grew to political and financial importance within a few years. Chicago alone had grown by 1840 to a population of nearly five thousand people, and it was said that one firm there shipped out one hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars worth of hides and wheat that year. The stream of people that came from the East, Irishmen and Germans and thrifty Scandinavians, was swollen and pushing like a floodtide. Once a few families a day passed the lonely farms; now they poured in steady streams along the National Road. Indeed the roads were more than a passageway; they were a promise of power, and an acknowledgment of importance. Highways, in fact, became a political issue, and one of the reasons that Martin Van Buren, the Tammany Democrat from New York, had to move out of the White House in 1841 was because he had opposed the Cumberland Road, and the Illinois and Michigan Canal Grant. The West intended to take care of itself now, and if the Administration didn't want to bother finishing the harbor at Chicago, and for some trifling sum sold off the construction scows, pile-drivers, and other equipment, well, the West wasn't going to ignore the slight by any means.

The man who did walk into the White House that year was William Henry Harrison, and he came from beyond the Allegheny Mountains, and he spoke with the voice of the bulging West. The Democrats threw insults at him; they said he had been weaned on hard cider and had lived in a log

cabin. So the Illinois Whigs cheerfully picked up the insults and made a raffish banner of them. They rigged up a log cabin on wheels and dragged it behind thirty teams of oxen. A keg of the famous hard cider stood beside the cabin door, and the farmers slapped their thighs and cackled with pleasure as the tableau passed.

"Mother's milk and hard cider . . . that'll put brains and brawn in a man, and the West will give him the backbone to use 'em," they said to each other. They liked the idea of a cider-drinking President; gave 'em something in common, they felt, complimenting themselves while they lauded their representative, as men always do. Stephen enjoyed that noisy, rowdy presidential campaign, with flares flaming and men cheering. He rode around and made speeches from town to town, and he learned to use the vernacular as he never would have mastered it among his own neighbors. He talked like a Westerner, but an educated Westerner . . . and that, also, complimented the listeners. An educated Westerner . . . it still was novelty enough to distinguish him. But it was significant that those farmers liked the idea.

The ability which he had always had of turning any commonplace occasion into a corner of a play came in very handy now, and if he hadn't had the growing mill business to take care of, he might have devoted himself entirely to the game. The philosophy of the election interested him enormously. Tactics were simple. You began by painting Van Buren as a monster, a luxury-loving plutocrat trying to harness the West like an ox to do the work of the East. Stephen pictured this graphically; he could portray the high-falutin' White House life of which Van Buren was supposed to be guilty, with just the proper blend of envy and scorn. Whereas most of the campaigners had to fall back on hazy generalities, Stephen could roll his tongue around descriptions of fabulous food and extravagant pleasures, until the hard-working crowds stamped their tired feet and banged their horny hands with lascivious indignation.

Then, when they were at this peak of greedy envy, he began expounding the virtues of their own candidate. He was the man of the crowd, magnified and beatified. Stephen described his virtues in terms of the crowd's own simple accomplishments. He was everything the voters were, only more. He had their faults, which showed incidentally that theirs

were not entirely blameworthy. He wanted what they wanted, whatever that was. When you voted for him, you were voting for yourself. When they got him into the White House, they all felt that something had been done for their own sakes. The common man had made himself heard . . . now see what might happen!

The last three elections had reflected the same growing spirit, the glorification of work and the common man, and the repudiation of privilege and wealth. Did it mean that Americans did not approve of wealth or privilege? On the contrary, Stephen observed. For all the time they were applauding the man of toil and privation, they were scrambling, hoof over paw, to a higher rung on the ladder. While they were championing the common man, they were doing everything possible to lift themselves above him. While they were reviling Martin Van Buren for his soft living in the White House, they were breaking their backs to be able to buy their wives new horsehair furniture for the new parlor, lately sanctified in the three- or four-room cabins, and velvet frocks in which to sit properly and nicely upon each other's furniture on a Sunday afternoon.

There was a lugubrious holiness to them in this frantic accumulating. It was not just trivial competitive avarice; it became a robust social philosophy. Stephen often wondered just what it was they were laboring so mercilessly to prove. If he asked them and they were articulate enough to answer they said, "Well, I tell you, Mr. Phelps. A man ain't just workin' for himself out here. He's workin' to git good schools and fine purty towns and roads and everything. Fer everybody. The man who can do the most for this country is the man who's got the most money." That's what they said now, and with that saying there was dawning within them a new concept of industrialism. Sometimes it struck Stephen as grimly humorous that the very guilt for which they had condemned him a few years ago, and for which they had burned down his house, was now the thing which they wanted to attract to the town. They saw at last that labor alone was pitifully inadequate, that a man must extend himself, and that money was the only way this extension could be possible.

"What this country needs out here is plenty of good rich men," they began saying to each other now, and in those

words lay the epitaph of the frontier, when the pioneer's wealth was his strong back and his ready hands and his believing heart.

Money-making became a kind of religion with some of these people; they pulled each other up to higher levels of having and living by the mean bootstraps of each other's covering. Discontent, it seemed like, was a good healthy prod to keep you sweatin' and gettin'.

"'Course ambition does kind of roon your peace," Elk said to Stephen once when they were talking along this subject. "But the West is the country fer gittin' ahead, and nobody would git ahead if he was bone-satisfied with what he already has."

Other men shrugged off the credit or the blame for all their hard work onto their womenfolks.

"You git something fer your woman, and soen as some other woman sees it, she makes her man bust his hide till he gits somethin' even better fer *her*. Then you got to go through the whole thing all over again. But that's what makes things improve, I reckon."

So the making of money was lifted into the realm of social morality. A good, ambitious American ought to irk other men into counting for something. It was a man's simple duty to become rich enough to make himself envied and copied.

Morals usually kept you from doing what you wanted to do . . . or tried to, anyway. But this moral philosophy of money-makin' for everybody's sake kicked the door wide open for you, so that you could do just about anything to turn a dollar, and then you could kind of salve your conscience by thinking how much you were helping the town and the county to amount to something. Those were the magic words. . . . "To amount to something." Practically anything was all right, if it led to that phrase.

But a few of the old-fashioned women weren't too sure about what had been gained.

"I dunno," Opal said bewilderedly after Elk had bought her some new china which everyone had admired in Twicker and Dane's window. "I thought when I got the china all the victuals would taste better. But seems like wantin' is better than havin'. Wantin' gives your mind somethin' to do. And havin' . . . well, it ain't never what it let on like it was goin' to be."

Some of the men in town said Stephen had been pretty sly about his political speechmaking and one thing and another, for before the winter of the election had passed, they had word that a big new public highway was going to run right past the door of the Phelps' mill. Had to swing around a bit and make a turn in order to accommodate the mill, and that jes showed you what politics could do fer you, if you played it right. The road, of course, assured the success of the mill. The mill had started off with a bang, because every farmer from miles around was willing to haul his grain an extra distance, just to see what kind of feller this Mr. Phelps was that they'd heard so much about.

Stephen bought surplus wheat from anyone who would sell it, and ground it to flour, then packed it in wooden barrels, one hundred and ninety-six pounds to the barrel. He paid a cent more per bushel than other millers were offering, because he liked to do things in a high-handed generous way, and this was all right with the farmers. They had to laugh at him, though, for the boastful way he had his name splashed over the sides of the barrels. "Phelps Flours," the red paint said, with a flourish of the last S.

"Might as well let those New Orleans merchants know we're proud of what we're shipping down to them," he said. "This Illinois wheat of ours is no anonymous letter. I'm honored to sign my name to it."

Stephen sometimes thought of the road and the river as being very much alike. He had dammed up the stream, bracing those stone-filled cribs against the current to hold it back and make a wide millpool. He dammed up the road also, holding back the life which flowed over the road, sometimes quite literally by giving the immigrants who came past a day's or a week's work which detained them finally in the town. The mill gave a new definition to Mount Hollow, really, extending its borders by several miles, and also concentrating its utility back within itself instead of scattering its needs to other localities and disseminating the little ready cash that was there.

It was a fancy that pleased him, and he used to think of it with great satisfaction as he stood on the loading platform looking out over the harnessed stream and the equally harnessed road. The river had been but a useless meandering vagrant, until he had taken it into his own bare hands and had

squeezed power from it. The town, too, was a sprawling huddle of ugliness; it still was ugly, God knew, but he had dreams now of building it into something . . . even into something which might be a monument to himself.

He was feverish with ambition now; everything was too slow to please him. He toyed with the reckless idea of powering his sawmill with steam. Steam engines were pretty wheezy and asthmatic; they were always breaking down and having to be repaired; *The Western Monthly Magazine* had a humorous article about these "mechanical invalids," describing how they shivered with chills and fevers, as if in need of medical aid. They had, it seemed, the Illinois shakes like everybody else. But Stephen believed in them.

"When I have money enough, I'll buy the finest steam engine built," he said to Amoret. He figured and fumed, but he could not yet afford it, so he went on the best way he could, putting in one piece of machinery at a time for the sawmill, and never telling anyone the full vision he had of building up a town, if not as magnificent at least more habitable than the mirage which had beckoned them out here.

He was consumed with the need to do ten things at once. Seasons were too slow in their whirling; months must lie between the sowing and the harvest, then months again before the next sowing and ripening; these men's minds were equally slow in the way they painfully revolved, grinding their crude mental grist into workable thoughts. Why, a fortune could be made out here, if he had a clever man to work with! He wrote importunately to Stanton Purvis, who was back in Philadelphia, begging him to come out and let them get rich together. But Stant had had enough of the West in one brief trip. He had written back contritely, "It may take me twenty years, but sometime I'll make it up to you for burying you in that mud."

Yet the thing that ultimately made Stephen a rich man was literally dug out of the mud. And Amoret herself had much to do with that. It came about quite inadvertently.

(2)

During the daytimes or when others were present, everything seemed right between them. When their eyes met, they

held for a startled moment, and then often each would look away, or begin too quickly to speak of something tangible at hand. But the silence between them grew with the years. The more they talked to each other as time went on, the deeper lay the silence of the things which they were not able to say.

It seemed sometimes to Stephen that there was a glass wall between them. In the midst of his passion he pounded his hands upon this wall yet made no imprint on it, except that he bruised his hands. He could see Amoret's face beyond that glass, beautiful and acquiescent, sometimes unutterably sad and sometimes benignly tranquil. When he tried to shout his angry questions at her, she seemed not to hear them. She only reached out occasionally and stroked his hand absently, as if he were an unreasonable, willful child, whom she forgave without exploring. As if his rages were dark rooms into which she never could venture her way.

Sometimes when the comradeship of day brought them into spurious closeness, he tried to convince himself that everything was as it had been before Joel Adams went away. He spoke expansively to himself then, and swaggered up and down in his mind, reminding himself explicitly how Amoret had loved him, how she had reached out to him once . . . Why, their first child, Stevie, was the walking declaration of the passion which she herself had chosen to show him. He lived over every nuance and modulation of that night as a musician may follow in his mind the unfurling mutations of a symphony. He returned to the memory of that night like a hungry man to an orchard, like a homesick man to the shelter of a house from which he has been banished. It became for him his dearest possession, almost as if it had been the only night with his beloved, who now was forever dead. But she was in no way dead. His second child was the declaration that their marriage was alive.

Yet he never could forget the bitter conceiving of that second child. He visited that in his memory no more than he could help. He rearranged it as he remembered, so that it could become more bearable to him. But it was in his mind a spot to be avoided, and when he accidentally stumbled upon it, he hurried away, and told himself that he could not bear to remember anything connected with the burning down of their house.

He hurried away from it into a reverie of boasting about

Amoret's love for him. He pathetically exaggerated her love for him; he mused upon it deliberately as a sick man will sit in the sun's strength, and his pride was such that he always concluded his reverie by thinking, "Whatever else has been denied me in this devilish life, at least I've had the very passionate love of an ardent, beautiful wife."

Once, years later, he was startled to discover that the men toward whom he had been most generous in business were those who in some way had shown him that they realized how devoted was his wife. He realized then that all the men he had believed he liked the best had one trait in common; they had rendered to him that particular masculine homage a man pays to another man because some woman obviously adores him. For in every way that eye could penetrate Amoret adored her husband. With all his personal embellishments, Amoret's obvious love was his greatest and proudest worn adornment.

Only when they were finally alone, and she lay supinely in his arms with her cool lips still, and her eyes full of pity for him, did he tear away the tatters of his pride and know that once again he had tried to storm his way into a door which could be opened only from within.

No matter how he tried, he could not scoop up that mind of hers and hold it within the grasp of his own mind. It was as intangible as smoke, yet as defined in essence as stone. There was a space in her mind across which he could not stride into the inner being of her. He could only stand on some distant shore and look across the mists and the vapors of rivers and plains and, straining his eyes, perceive that an inner land existed, into which he could not set his foot.

In the same way, he could not encompass her body with his own. Her mind, the rivers and pastures and the forbidden inner island to which he never quite crossed, was but a map of that more tangible land of her body, never denied to him, never fortified against him, yet never quite taken. Given, but never quite received. For a band of uncrossable separateness lay between them, as uninvadeable as a point in geometric space, as impossible to explore as it is to bisect a point. However close he tried to come, the distance between them was still that theoretical remnant that lies in the hypothesis that not even in infinity can the distance be bridged between two points by infinitely halving that distance. So maddening be-

came his obsession about the ultimate unpossessableness of Amoret, that his mind was constantly devising new and more rarefied algebraic or geometric similes to describe it. While his mind tortured itself with these, his skilled yet confounded body waged subtler and ever more shamed warfare against that other undefended but uncapturable fortress.

It became an attenuated enmity which no words could possibly describe, an epic which continued for years, unrecorded and yet never for an instant forgotten. It lay under everything he said to her, and his recurring tenderness tortured him more cruelly than did his intermittent rage.

Sometimes when he saw her going gently about her work, speaking gaily to the children, laughing innocently with them, and then sending her sweet glance quickly to his face for confirmation, he thought he must rise from whatever he was doing and cross to her and fall weeping upon his knees, beseeching her to take him into herself again as once she had. But he knew she would say, if such preposterous dialogue could have been fabricated into words, "Why, of course, my darling . . . come, let me comfort you." She would hold his face between her breasts and murmur to him as she consoled the children, and would look down from the serene sky of her green eyes, and ask, "Is it well now?" She would unstintingly give him all of herself he asked. She would give, but he would receive nothing, because he knew that somewhere hidden in her was an area beyond his possessing.

(3)

It had taken him much longer than he had intended to build that house which he had boasted would be the finest one in Illinois. That was not because he was procrastinating or negligent about it. It was, rather, because the widening possibilities he saw outstripped his ideals, unbelievable as that once would have seemed. By the time he was ready to begin building one house, his perception of what could be done out here had raced ahead to make his plans obsolete. It was hardly worth-while starting the four-roomed house which had seemed a mansion when he first drew up the plans. Now he saw how he could build a really handsome dwelling, for he unexpectedly sold a tract of eighty acres on his north lot to

great advantage, and had within his grasp money enough to think with audacious bigness. But that money went not into the house, but into the sawmill which was to supply fine walnut lumber, and even intricate scrollwork to edge the eaves, face the cupola, and embellish the wide porch which he intended to have run around two sides of the house.

"It seems a rather roundabout route for arriving at a house," he apologized when he explained this delay to Amoret. "The fact is, I'll use the money to build up the sawmill. But I'll be doing it, really, in order to give you a proper house."

"I can wait for it," Amoret said. "I've become accustomed to Mr. Adams' cabin now. I'll almost hate to move from it."

Every day of the time they had lived in the little cabin, no matter what they did to it, it had remained Joel's cabin. He was most present by his absence, as all men of influence are, since it was the stirred mind which kept him visible, and not merely the unchosen fact of his body being at hand.

Sometimes when Amoret read her Bible and found the sonorous words closed against her understanding, she read them again hearing Mr. Adams' own thoughtful voice. And if she still did not understand them, she listened in her imagination for what he might probably have said to her in explaining them. It seemed to her a surer way than trying to puzzle it out for herself.

Years later when she told Joel this, he said, "Ma'am, sometimes when I couldn't understand something I read in the Good Book, I would say to myself, 'Joel, what would you say if Mrs. Phelps was to ask you what that verse means?' and then I'd *have* to find the explanation for it."

"Did you really do that?" Amoret had asked, incredulously. "Even when you never bothered to write to us . . . to Mr. Phelps, I mean?"

"You see, ma'am . . . I never was very far away from you," he said earnestly. "You know it says 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' My treasure . . . and my heart . . ." But he never finished that sentence. And that, of course, was many years later.

Right now, in these years when the children were still babies, he was present only by the constant awareness of his absence, by his few books left on the shelf, by his hand-lettered, boyish mottoes on the wall, by the lovingly made

furniture of his house, and by the tamed bird who seemed never reconciled to not seeing him.

"I'm going to set a trap for that bird, if he hasn't sense enough to go back to the woods with the rest of 'em," Stephen said once when the worried fluttering of the bluejay around their dinner table angered him.

"He'll become wild again sometime," Amoret said. "He stays away now more than he did when we first came here."

"A man making a pet of a wild bird! It's just the kind of thing you'd expect Adams would do," he grumbled, coming as near as he dared to criticizing Joel. "Anyway, that's not the point. I'm going to get rid of it."

Amoret looked at him coolly. "I don't think you could get your hands on him, Stephen," she said.

"Nonsense." He was defiant in spite of himself. "It would be a simple matter to shoot him."

"You'll not touch him," she said quietly.

Since there was no preacher now to hold the town's meetings, these fell apart. The women in Mount Hollow talked sometimes of writing to the Seminary and asking to have a young preacher sent to them. They eagerly watched the immigrants who came through on the public highway, hoping there might be some kind of a preaching man among them. Whenever there was he would stay over a Sunday to hold a meeting for them. But they could never induce him to remain, for he was always pushing ahead to some destination of his own.

"Seems like God has jes' forgot us, stuck off here by ourselves," Opal said forlornly.

"It isn't fair to say God has forgotten us, if we haven't even asked Him to send us a minister," Amoret said. "I know *I've* not prayed for one to be sent."

"No, and nuther have I," Opal admitted. "I keep hoping Mr. Adams . . ."

That was how the female prayer meetings started. The women were too shy about their devotions to tell the men what they were doing, but once a week as many as could get away from their home duties came up to Amoret's hill on a Thursday afternoon. If the weather was good, they sat out under the sheltering branches of the walnut trees and said their simple prayers. Somebody always brought cookies or doughnuts, and Amoret found some raspberry or blackberry

cordial for the visiting after the meeting. When no other women came, she kept the hour by herself.

After awhile, they began bringing their tiny offerings, so that the preacher might find something ready to work with when he came. Mrs. Dane said she understood that was exactly what the Bible meant when it said "occupy till I come."

"I think you got to git things ready, if you expect God to do His part," she said. "My mother used to say, 'Git the pot boilin' and God will provide the victuals.'"

"It would be wonderful," they said, "if we could have a brick church. We ain't got a thing in Mount Hollow yet made out of brick. It would give our town a kind of a spiritual cornerstone to have the first brick building in it be a church. Show anybody who had wits enough to read what they see, that our first interest out here is standin' right with God."

They described the church they hoped to build, but they knew that it was only the boldest kind of dreaming. Woman-dreaming, in fact, which is never shackled down to possibility in the practical way man-dreaming is. Bricks were prohibitively expensive. They couldn't afford a frame building yet . . . and here they were dreaming about bricks, which would have to be hauled, every one of them, from Edgar County by ox-wagon! Springfield now had many brick buildings around the square, and there was no denying that it made all the difference in the world in the appearance of the city. Frame buildings, no matter how handsomely they were built . . . even if they were fancy and elegant like the house Mr. Phelps had just finished building for his family . . . looked like something growed up out of the wilderness. But bricks . . . bricks reminded you of the cities in the East, and there was no denying it. Bricks showed that men had time to do things right; bricks made a city look like it was amountin' to some-
thin'.

"'Course we'll be downright lucky if we ever git ourselves even a slab-sided church," they admitted. "But it don't do no harm to think big. A lovely pink brick building with nice white shutters . . . and going up the steps on a Sunday morning . . . a nice handsome man of God with his Bible under his arm. I tell you, it would feel like living again to be in a town that had such a thing in it. It would give us all heart."

It is strange to see how things come about. If Amoret's little daughter Harriet hadn't needed a doll, Amoret never would have made her discovery. Most children had to be contented with crude little moppets made of an old white woolen stocking stuffed with rags and with a fierce, scowling, cross-eyed face embroidered on it. But Amoret remembered a doll with a china head, and she wanted one terribly for her small daughter. She thought and thought about it, and finally it occurred to her that she might try to make one. Looking around for some material of which to fashion the head, she remembered that morning, which seemed so long ago, when she had found the coon's footprint frozen in the clay and had been terrified, thinking it was the print of a lost or kidnaped baby.

She remembered how delicately the clay had taken that little print, how the dimple below each tiny toe had shown clearly. She could take a handful of this clay and mold it into a chubby little face. She grew quite excited thinking about it, and as soon as her work was finished she left the children with Emily Larsen, and ran out to the northeast slope of the hill where that vein of clay was.

It was pleasant to be there, for it reminded her of that other day. It had been a morning very much like this . . . but she had been someone else. A woman with child, aloof and dreamy as such women are. She stood there with her head lifted to the sky, remembering the things Joel Adams had told her that other morning. She thought it was the first real talk they ever had together. It was more than a talk; it was a scattering of seeds into an earth opened richly to receive them. From those meager handfuls, it seemed to her, great waving fields of wheat had grown within her. They would be harvested, and their seed given back to make new harvests, over and over, as long as she lived.

She stooped down and scooped up two handfuls of the clean smooth clay. It was only slightly moist, for this was the high place of the hill, where no water ever stood except at times like this just after a rain. The clay felt silky and smooth and cold, and it took shape easily. As she began to form the little head, she found her fingers surprisingly nimble, and

within a few moments she had a cherubic face lying in her palm, a merry plump little face that made her laugh aloud for pleasure. Perhaps she might paint the hair black with some of Stephen's ink; she might be able to daub some color on the cheeks. She was quite excited thinking about it as her fingers went on forming the dimpled chin and the short curved doll's neck. She would make a fine rag body, open at the top, and she would gather the cloth tightly around that chubby neck to hold the head firmly.

Her child would have the best homemade doll in the neighborhood, and when she was big enough to understand she would realize that this was because her mother loved her very much. It seemed to Amoret sometimes that she could never love her little daughter enough to make up for the joylessness in which she had conceived her. But out of that joylessness had grown a lively vigorous delight. She sometimes felt that was the pattern of all the beautiful things in the world. They came to you disguised as sorrow and tragedy and bitterness; they came to you like a glove turned wrong-side out, with all the knots and seams and ugliness showing. You could put them on that way and grumble about them, and everyone who looked at you would see only your grumbling and the seams. Or, by that wonderful power which God has given to man, you could turn any sorrow which came to you right-side out. Perhaps there was not good and evil, two separate elements. Perhaps there was only one, with a right-side and wrong-side . . . and it was your business to turn it blessing-side out.

"God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good." That is surely what Genesis had to say about it . . . Perhaps man had only to look at everything in the world on the God-side of it in order to find heaven itself. But whether that was true or not about all evil, it had become true for her about her little daughter.

"Behold I lay before you blessing and cursing . . . choose blessing." The Bible words spanned across the sky of her thinking like a rainbow. It happened often this way, she found. A woman thought along in the privacy of her mind, feeling her way uncertainly yet bravely; then a majestic line seemed to speak itself above her thoughts, summing them up and rounding them out, and giving authority to them. When words came tumbling into her mind like this it did not matter

whether the quotation was quite accurate or not. God spoke sometimes one way and sometimes another, just as a beloved might sometimes tell his love in one word, and sometimes in another.

She had finished the little head now; there was something droll and chubby and winsome about it. She took one of the stout bone hairpins out of her hair and pierced a clean hole in each corner of the square little yoke she had fashioned under the neck. It could be sewed on the body when it dried, so that it would not wobble. She was very proud of it, and pleased with herself because she had thought of doing it. She stood it in a little patch of sunlight when she went back to the house, so that it would dry.

The doll finished up even better than she had expected, for when it was thoroughly dried, the clay had a satiny, almost chinalike surface. It made a better look-at doll, however, than a play-with doll, for the clay head was too fragile to be safe in the hands of a clumsy, exuberant child.

Emily wanted a doll then, to take home to the "baby" as the Larsens still called their youngest. So Amoret made another, and then several, as other people in the village saw them and admired them and wanted them for their own children. The neighborhood women said she'd have to stop giving them away and suggested that maybe next spring when they were going to have the Church Sociable for the church which didn't yet exist, Amoret might make and dress some dolls to be sold.

"It would be something mighty nice you could do for the church," they said to her. "I wouldn't be surprised if God gave you the idea in the first place to use for raisin' money for the church."

But, for whatever purpose God had given her the idea, it did not stop with the dolls. It was Mrs. Nat Burden, so unctuous now in trying to make up for the mischief which had come in through poor impetuous, blundering Nat, who really saw the possibilities. She made a special trip over on horseback to talk to Amoret about it, and she took her very mysteriously into the parlor, and waited until they were seated with their knees touching, and then she whispered it.

"Miz Phelps," she said tremulously, "it kind of come to me in a vision. Ordinarily, I don't set much store by visions, but I was jest washin' clothes yesterday down in the wellhouse,

not thinking about much of anything . . . and all of a sudden, this jest come to me."

"What did?"

The tight cinnamon-colored little face was lighted up with the rare ecstasy of a parched mind suddenly flooded with inspiration. "Now listen to me," she said excitedly. "If you could make dolls of that there clay, you could make more than dolls."

"More than dolls? What do you mean?"

"I mean *brick*," she said. "I think you got brick clay up there on your hill. I think it's an answer that jest come straight from God. It's manna, that's what it is. Those bricks is jest manna to feed our church."

The two women went up to the hill to look at the island of clay, and Mrs. Nat Burden squatted down and dug with her thorny fingers into the earth. It did seem that the clay followed a definite vein; it ran along in a narrow stream for a ways, and then seemed to spread out with only a thin shaggy covering of prairie grass over it.

"We certainly got enough here to build the church," Mrs. Burden said excitedly. "That is, if Mr. Phelps would give us this here mud. Ain't no good to him, I suppose."

"But we couldn't make bricks ourselves," Amoret faltered.

"Of course we couldn't. What we'd have to do is to set ourselves up in a brick business. We'd have to git somebody who knewed how it was done . . . what kind of machinery and all likea that."

"But that would take money."

"Everything takes money. Certain'y. But what's money for if it ain't to serve mankind? That's what I want to know, what's it for, anyway? First thing you better do, Miz Phelps, is talk to your husband about it and see what he says. He's a very smart man. You see what he says."

What Stephen said was something that couldn't be repeated. He began by laughing so that you could hear him clear down to the mill, then he took Amoret on his lap and kissed a necklace around her throat, and finally, when she kept at it until he couldn't ignore answering any longer, he said, "Mrs. Phelps, darling, you stick to your doll-making. And if you get tired of making dolls, and think you'd like to make another baby, why . . ."

Nevertheless, the project ran like wildfire through the

town. No one spoke very frankly about it, yet everyone knew that something very wonderful and strange and daring was afoot. None of the men chose to take it seriously; none of them were willing to help, so the women themselves mothered the thing. With that singular lack of humor which makes women capable of attempting almost anything, they carried out their plans doggedly.

"The thing is we've got to take a sample of this here clay down to some good brick-firing yard and find out if it really is any good," Mrs. Burden said.

They decided to use the collections they had saved up to pay the stage fare to Saint Louis, but the next problem was to decide which of the women had better go. In the end it wasn't a woman who went; it was young Tom Larsen, who was sixteen now with a good head on his shoulders.

"He ain't growed-up enough yet to be man-mean," his mother said when they proposed that they send him.

They didn't even tell Elk what they were planning until the last minute, and then Elk said largely, "Well, I guess it won't do the boy no harm to git out and see a little bit of the world, even if he is goin' on a fool's errand. Keep your eyes open, Tom, and tell your papa all about it when you git back."

Amoret had borrowed one of the muslin meal-bags which Stephen was now using to ship the wheat flour and corn meal. "Phelps Flours," was stamped on the front, and in the curlicue at the end of the S were Stephen's little red flowers, which was the pun he was using for his trade mark. They filled the bag with the clay, as much as the boy could lug, and he started off on the stage with it clamped between his knees, looking sheepish and yet delighted with the whole business.

In the pocket of his roundabout, Tom had a letter laboriously written by Mrs. Phelps in her curly little handwriting. It was addressed to the master of a brickyard in Saint Louis whose name they did not know. But it explained to him just what it was they wanted to do with the bricks if this clay were found suitable, and they asked him very respectfully how he would suggest their going about the business. Tom was to keep his eyes peeled, and ask directions when he got to Saint Louis and God would direct his path. Jesus once told his friends to go into the city and there they would meet a man

carrying a pitcher of water, and when they asked him where they might stay, he would direct them to a large upper room. If God knew how to arrange things for his workers then, surely he had not lost any of his skill now . . . if the heart and the purpose of a man (even a half-grown man like Tom) was good.

Every woman in the town began watching for the stage the very day after Tom left, but it was weeks before he finally came back. There was no flour sack between his knees now. Instead he had bought himself a very handsome traveling bag, and he was handling it carefully for there was something precious inside. There were, in fact, five beautiful pink bricks, of as excellent a quality as anyone ever had seen. He had each brick wrapped carefully in flannel, so it wouldn't chip or crack. In the pocket where Amoret's letter had traveled, was one written back to her by Mr. Hubert Pine, who owned the finest brickyards in Saint Louis.

Dear Madam, (the letter said)

It gives me great honor to inform you that the sample of the clay which you sent makes up into most admirable brick. If you decide to go into the brick-manufacturing business, I can only wish you the greatest success in your undertaking.

As I learn from Tom Larsen that you have no man at hand who is experienced in this matter, I gladly offer you my own experience in whatever way it will be useful to you.

I have lately improved the machinery and the methods in my own brickyard, so I have on hand sundry useable but slightly outmoded equipment, to wit a very good wooden pug-mill and also a down-draft kiln, which I had shipped from England when I started my brick business. This I could let you have at a very nominal charge.

I assure you of my sincere good wishes for your success in this undertaking.

Your humble servant,

HUBERT PINE.

P.S. I would be happy to consider taking young Thomas Larsen into my brickyard as an apprentice. He is a fine lad, my dear Madam.

The very next day the bricks were put on display in Twicker and Dane's general store, and within an hour they had become the cynosure of all thought and conversation in the town. Mr. Dane himself contributed a yard of elegant purple velvet, which he draped handsomely over a cake plate to form a kind of throne. On this he laid a brick as opulently as if it were a piece of diamond jewelry. Amoret lettered the little card which stood at the base of this wonderful display, saying:

Manna Brick

First brick ever manufactured from Mount Hollow clay
to be used later in the erection of the
First Church of Mount Hollow, Illinois.

Other exhibits in the Twicker and Dane window showed a brick submerged in water, to demonstrate how durable it was, and another display showed a third brick hanging from a scale, to prove that its weight compared favorably with a brick manufactured by the Totum Company, over in Edgar County. Under these two stood another card which said:

Will you invest some money in the Manna Brick Company? It will prosper the whole of our town.

While admiration was at its height, the serpent itself crept out and spoke, and this time it was kind old Mr. Twicker whose voice it used. "Seems to me this town is doin' somethin' pretty handsome for Mr. Phelps," Mr. Twicker said.

"Why, what do you mean, Mr. Twicker?" one of the women of the committee cried indignantly. "What's Mr. Phelps got to do with it?"

"Well, as I understand it, the clay is on his ground, ain't it?" Twicker said. "Looks to me we're making him a present of a very fine business if he wants to accept it." From that minute on, of course, the Manna Brick Company was doomed. Nobody wanted to put any money into it; not the way things stood anyway. The women would have invested in it. But women had no money.

"Land sakes! where'd women git any money?" they asked each other patiently. "Like the old sayin' has it, 'Illinois is

heaven fer men and horses, but it's hell for women and oxen . . . ' An ox might maybe have some money, but certain sure no *woman* would have any she could call her own!"

It looked for a few weeks as if they had hit an insurmountable obstacle. The men now were using the whole thing as a good joke. They were keeping one eye on Stephen, nevertheless, to see if he was going to try to take any advantage of all this woman nonsense. But Stephen at this point had all he could manage with his mill.

At last the display came out of Twicker and Dane's, and the heads of the houses looked around for another butt for their humor. But the women had not finished, by any means; they needed more time to accumulate, a few pennies at each meetin', enough money to finance their next step. That carried them through the winter, and when spring came they were ready.

This time Amoret herself was to make the trip. She got herself ready surreptitiously, too excited to sleep at night for the daring thing she was attempting. She blurted out her intention to Stephen only twenty-four hours before she was to leave. "Emily and I have everything baked up and ready to last you a week," she began, as soon as he had finished his breakfast. "I wouldn't want you to be hungry."

"What is this speech you're addressing to my stomach, madam?" Stephen said with a twinkle of good nature.

"I'm . . . I'm taking a trip to Saint Louis," she said in a pale rush. "The ladies are sending me."

He stared at her, then his face darkened. "The ladies . . . who in God's name are the ladies?" he roared. "I can't remember seeing any ladies since we left Philadelphia."

"The ladies of our church," she said meekly.

"What church? I've never seen any church in this town . . . what're you talking about anyway?"

"We're . . . we're going to build it," she said, gaining confidence from sheer despair now. She plunged on, telling him of Mr. Hubert Pine's offer to help.

"I forbid it," Stephen said. "I've never heard such poppycock in my life. That's what a snow-bound winter does to a woman."

He went down to the mill, considering that he had settled the matter. But when he came back to the house at dinner-time, she was still determined but pale. He thought it over in

angry silence for a few minutes, then arrived at his usual strategy, which was playfulness. "So you want to go into the brick business?" he said, pulling one of her curls, and kissing her eyebrow. "You think you'd like to compete with your poor husband's lumber business?"

"Of course not, Stephen."

"You own a clay-pit, you *ladies*?"

"No, we don't," she said, reddening.

"Oh?"

"We . . . we thought you'd give us the clay. It isn't any good to you, is it?"

He bowed mockingly and put his hand over his heart. "It would be a pleasure, madam, to give you anything I have."

"Stephen, please try to understand," she said, almost in tears.

"I do understand, my pet. I remember Mr. Adams explained it to me a long time ago." He felt his pulse stamping angrily through his veins. "He read it out of that Bible of yours. Remember? Something about a woman considering a field and buying it? I suppose that is where you got your idea in the first place?"

What did Stephen mean by that? She wrinkled her bronze eyebrows, trying to remember. Why, of course. She saw Mr. Adams as he had stood in their old cabin that day, holding her Bible open in his two hands and reading out the beautiful words.

She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She ariseth also while it is yet night, and giveth food to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field and buyeth it. With the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard . . .

She had read that thirty-first chapter of Proverbs many times after Mr. Adams had showed it to them, thinking only that she loved its beauty. But there was more to it than that! Could those words in her mind have shaped her and molded her . . . as she had molded little Harriet's doll from the clay . . . so that she was becoming more like that daring, virtuous woman of long ago? Could it be possible those words, accepted into her heart, had power in them to shape her very

deeds? From timidity and uncertainty, to freedom and daring?

She thought back quickly over the steps by which she had come to this amazing, defiant moment when she was starting off on a journey—"to consider a field . . . and to plant a vineyard." God *had* brought her, and He had led her so gently that she had not even realized what was happening. She thought she had been making only a doll. . . .

One of those rainbows of quotation, then, spanned across her inner sky, and an illumination of gratitude seemed to light and lift everything out of uncertainty into freedom and authority, and even into a compassionate love for Stephen.

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; and he delighteth in his way.

Well, then, there would be no need to fear the rest of the journey. Not just the trip to Saint Louis, to be sure, but that much more perilous journey along which she must try to take Stephen also. That long thankless errand Tobias had bidden her do for him, carrying his vision to his son, and to their children, and on into visible meaning for the long future ahead. She need not fear it, for the outcome was in God's care, and her steps were being "ordered."

Stephen, his face clenched in anger, unclasped her hand and broke away from her. He had seen that thing happening in her which drove him to distracted anger because he could not seize it and examine it, and discard it. He couldn't trust what he might say now, so he walked away from her, and looked out the window, trying to control himself. He had no intention of turning himself inside out and showing her that shameful humiliating jealousy that was corroding the core of him.

Jealousy, yes, that was it! He had used the word now, for the first time. Always before, he had called it by other names. It was more subtle than jealousy because of another man. More dangerous, really. This was jealousy because of an idea, a permeating notion which was gradually spreading throughout every part of her, changing every pore of her, making her daily less accessible to him. A man you could deal with. A man you could get your hands on. Even a much better man than that bumpkin, Adams.

Why, he had held her love in his hand like root and stem and flower of her; no other man could really come near a

woman loved as completely as he had loved Amoret. He had nothing to fear from any man on earth. But a notion . . . He was trembling now, and he felt her looking at him with those tranquil eyes of hers. That look of pity which maddened him was creeping into her eyes. Once again he realized that his uncontrolled hatred of all this which was in her had pushed him into an ignoble position. Once again she had all the advantage over him, the gentle, unassailable advantage that the delicately beautiful has over the violent. Once again he had made a complete fool of himself, at the very moment when it was most necessary that he keep command of the situation. He got hold of himself. When he spoke, his voice had its own good-natured pleasantness.

"Matter of fact, my pet, I made up my mind this morning that if you really do want to take this ridiculous trip, I'll help you," he said unexpectedly. Yes, that was it; that was the way. "I've been trying to figure out a way I could go with you. I can't have you traveling alone, like some common peddler woman."

She adjusted herself as quickly as she could to the new tactics. "I'm not traveling alone," she said. "Tom Larsen is going with me. He knows Mr. Pine, and we thought . . ."

"Excellent," Stephen said. "He's a good boy. He can look after you."

He sat down and stood her between his knees as he liked to do. "Now you must tell me all about it. Just why are you going, my dear? You tell me about it, and perhaps I can help you. After all, I know a bit about business, you know."

(5)

Nobody was prepared for what Amoret brought back from that adventuresome trip. She did not return by stage. Instead, one evening just at twilight a strange caravan drove up the road and stopped in front of the Phelps Mill. There was an ox wagon, and three two-horse wagons, piled high with tables, bedsteads, chairs, and cradles, and a strange tangle of machinery and brick molds. Three dusty-looking men, Tom Larsen, an assortment of children, and two jolly middle-aged women were distributed on the springless seats of the wagons. Amoret herself was driving one of the teams. Her

skin was tanned from the long trip in the sun, and her usually bright hair was heavy with dust. But she was in fine spirits. A new vocabulary had come upon her while she had been away, and almost before she finished kissing Stephen, who had come running down from the house at the recognizing of her, she began pouring out what she had learned about brick-making.

"Oh, darling . . . it's going to be wonderful . . . we won't need a bit more capital than we have right here . . . The Knight brothers own the pug-mill. Mr. Pine sold it to them cheap, and they know all about running it . . . and we've plenty of molds . . . Mr. Pine says that we ought to be able to turn out three thousand bricks a day with just the three men and Tom."

He looked at her in horror, then he could not help laughing at the earnestness of her, and at the lugubrious discomfort of the men and women she had brought back with her.

"Well . . . it looks as if you're in business," he said. "I see you've got a staff and plenty of machinery . . . everything but customers, I should say." He stepped forward then and offered his hand, with concealed distaste, to the nearest of the men. "My name is Stephen Phelps," he said. "I'd like to make you welcome here, sir."

The more grizzled of the Knight brothers looked ruefully at his dusty palm, then respectfully spat upon it and wiped it along the seat of his breeches before he shook hands.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, sir," he said bashfully. "This is my brother Bert and our women. That there is Abner Popel. Ab don't know some things, sir," he added in an undertone, not quiet enough not to be heard by Abner himself, "but he's a good strong man around brick. He's the fastest pulverizer with a spade that any of us ever seen, sir. But of course we don't aim to make hand-made brick now. We got this pug-mill we bought, like Miz Phelps was a'tellin' you."

"What about the kiln?" Stephen asked, more to show that he at least knew the word, than from any real desire to know.

"Why, that, sir, is bein' loaned to us fer the present by Mr. Pine. I give him my note on that, so's to git us started. I figger when we sell a few loads of brick, like Miz Phelps says we sure can, once we git to making it good . . ."

"I see," Stephen said coldly. "At present I am selling what

lumber the town seems able to buy. Any other building materials would only interfere . . ."

The meaning of this dawned rather slowly on the Knight brothers. "Well, I tell you," the youngest one said, "I figger one thing you can't have tew much of if you want a town to grow good, is plenty of buildin' material."

The older brother said uneasily, "And it ain't as if we was aimin' to set up business in competition to you, Mr. Phelps. You'll be ownin' both businesses, reely, and the one ought to help the other."

A wave of consternation and surprise washed over Stephen then. During the days while Amoret had been gone, he had been twisting and turning the idea in his mind, to see what he could do about it. He had decided that if Mr. Pine sent some of his big Saint Louis money out here and tried to set up a brickyard in rivalry to his lumber mill, he would fight it every step of the way. He would fight anyone who tried to interfere with what he had been building through the mill . . . Even Amoret and the women, with their ridiculous meddling.

But now suddenly there was nothing for him to fight. These simple people were standing here on his land, just as Joel Adams had stood a few years ago, offering to help him. To throw in all they had, which was only their strength and their hearts and their long days' labor, if he would just give what he had, his land and his brains and the small amount of capital he had somehow scraped together. For the first time in his whole life, he felt humble in the presence of people who appeared much smaller, but in reality were bigger than he was himself.

"You want us to be partners?" he asked gently.

"That's what we aim at," Bert Knight said, squinting up his blue eyes and grinning with relief.

Stephen then, with a melting inside himself, reached out his arm and drew Amoret close to his side.

"I've nothing to put into a partnership," he said. "Except this little woman here. Anything you might think I own really belongs to her. The idea was hers in the first place and whatever comes of it is hers."

CHAPTER TWO

During the next years, a great deal came of Amoret's idea. It spread like pollen over the countryside, and buildings sprang up wherever the idea lighted. The Manna Brick Company turned out a rather orangey-tinted brick which weathered well, and caught shadows in a pleasant deep violet hue.

Everyone was proud of the new buildings, no matter who happened to own them. Before many years, the dismal clap-board expression of Mount Hollow had been made colorful by the little stretch of brick pavement and the sunny-looking fronts of the small buildings, punctuated with green blinds, and white-painted piazzas embellished with Stephen's handsomest scrollwork. The brick houses were a challenge to the ones built from Stephen's lumber, so that even these became more elaborate and pretentious than they might otherwise have been. It wasn't by any means the old map of Mount Olympus come to life, but so subtly does memory re-shape itself that many of the original neighbors would have sworn it was an exact duplicate.

"It jest shows what kin grow out of an idea that people git into their brains, if they back it up with good back-work," Opal often said.

Sometimes reluctantly Stephen himself remembered that old fabulous map mounted on Elk's cabin wall, and realized that it had had its way with him. He had been no builder. And yet, through the years, the idea behind that preposterous map had formed his actions and decisions. Opal Larsen had said, "You cain't tell what might happen if people had a purty idea like that to look at." He had laughed to himself as he heard it, but in the end, his days had been fashioned to fit the shape of that idea.

Whenever Amoret thought of the way the Phelps family had altered the face of Mount Hollow, with Stephen's lumber and her bricks, she always remembered that it was God who had planted the seed, and who watered it and weathered it through the years. The seed, and everything that grew from it, belonged to Him, and she kept it under His guidance,

rooting out whatever was unworthy for Him to see. Naturally it prospered.

When the brick industry was still only a notion which didn't look as if it could ever amount to much she had said to Stephen, "Will you promise me one thing?"

"Of course, my pet."

"Well, since this brick-making grew from our wanting a church so badly . . . I think we ought to make the church a partner in the brickyard."

"Good God! we can't have a lot of women overrunning it!"

"No. I don't mean that. I want us to give a tithe of our profits to the church."

"What in God's name is a tithe?" he grumbled. He never was quite as profane as when they were talking about some ramification of that one subject which infuriated him.

"A tenth part. If we earn ten dollars, I want a dollar to go to the church."

Stephen agreed, because at that moment it looked extremely unlikely that they'd ever have any profits to divide with anybody. But the notion pleased this absurd little woman of his so much . . . and besides, agreeing was the quickest way of disposing of a tiresome subject.

"They shall have their tithe," he said cheerfully. "And I shall give them the bricks when they're ready to build the church. Does that make you happy, my darling? Then come kiss me."

The whole situation was awkward from Stephen's point of view. The Knights persisted in considering that they worked for Amoret, and when he spoke to them about that, they reminded him quite humorlessly that this was what he himself had told them in the beginning. Naturally Stephen had known nothing about brick-making when all this started. That had put him in the false position of having to ask Amoret or one of the Knight brothers, but, as he often assured himself crossly, an educated man can learn more in a week than an ignorant man's experience will teach him in a year. Naturally he was the brains of the business and intended to remain at its head.

Amoret was almost maternal about the whole project. Yet in spite of her nonsensical emotionalism about it, she had also very practical judgment. Mr. Hubert Pine had evidently talked to her as if she were another man. He had showed her

everything and had explained all the processes to her. Pine, it seemed, was an Englishman who had learned brick-making in Bristol.

"Bricks to me, you maught sigh, are my religion, meaning no disrespect, mum," he had said. "When a man understands bricks he can build with them, just the way you can build with religion." That had established a bond between them, and before they had spent many hours together she felt almost as if she were being instructed by a kind father (although she did not remember a father of her own).

To everyone who watched, the whole project seemed rooted and grounded in something beyond mere business. Growing out of the simple-hearted need of a few wistful women, it had upon it that touch of preposterousness which is quite often the mark of God's finger. It was a thing worldly minded, sensible people might very plausibly laugh at. And yet it was not to be laughed out of being.

At first when Amoret came back from Saint Louis and began telling Stephen what she knew, he had been amused and witty about it. She reminded herself patiently that this was to be expected, for Stephen loved to consider her just his frilly-brained little darling. But finally he had listened. And she had forgotten to veil her knowledge with feminine tact. At last she had talked to him as if they were equals. It was a quake-making discovery to them both when they realized it.

Now it was she who was infatuated with the notion of some day using a steam engine to power their simple machinery. "We'll have steam when we can afford it, and when they get good steam engines built," she said excitedly.

She said she had asked Mr. Pine why the opening at the bottom of the pug-mill couldn't be cut into a rectangle, instead of a nondescript hole.

"For what purpose?" Stephen asked impatiently.

"Why, then it would feed the pulverized clay mixture out in a kind of long block and we could cut it off into bricks that would be all ready for the molds," she said with enthusiasm. It just seemed like good sense to her . . . the way a woman would handle dough. But she had discretion enough not to mention the woman and the dough to Mr. Pine or to Stephen. Mr. Pine had said it *was* a good idea, indeed, and he had pulled his moustache thoughtfully and had squinted his keen little British eye at her.

"Why, mum, you got something besides prettiness in that head of yours!" he had said.

Stephen, too, was squinting his own eye at her. "It is a good idea," he agreed. "In fact, I'll make a new floor in the tub, with a rectangular orifice that can lay the clay out on some kind of belt . . . or maybe on rollers . . . and we can cut it just the right size with sharp knives as it moves along. Ought to save quite a lot of time getting it into the molds."

When the first kiln-load was finished, she was delighted with it. "They look almost as wonderful to me as that first candle Mr. Adams showed me how to make," she cried, hugging Stephen's arm.

"And what a lopsided, bowlegged candle that was," he said. "Had a bad case of warts, as I remember."

"Yes, but I had made it myself," she said. "It was the first thing I had ever really made by myself."

The church, contrary to ardent hopes, was not the first building erected from the new brick. A remodeling of Stephen's own new house, in fact, claimed the first bricks, and this he insisted upon with cheerful, stubborn determination. It was almost as if he had overheard and vowed to nullify the women's original dream that Mount Hollow should mark itself with a spiritual cornerstone by having its first brick building be the church.

"I'm sorry," he said to them pleasantly. "But since I am making a present to the church, I'm afraid you'll have to allow me to do it at my own convenience."

Well, if not the first building . . . certainly the second, they said resignedly. They had raised enough money by now, what with Mr. Phelps giving them the bricks, so that by the middle of the second winter they had their little church built, with joists, rafters, floors, and a spire pointing to heaven, sawed from their own precious trees. The building was only about forty feet square, and it would require a few more years of saving and scrimping before they could buy real pews. But it was a church, and when God got around to taking notice of it all ready and waiting, He'd surely send them a preacher.

Meantime they were glad for whatever minister straggled along on his way to somewhere else. Some of these stragglers stayed a month, and one stayed nearly a year, and the church had to take up a special fund to help him get along to wher-

ever he belonged. It just seemed sometimes that after Mr. Adams it wasn't easy to be satisfied with the hell-and-high-water preachers who were "agin" jest about everything a body enjoys.

Mr. Adams taught you how to love righteousness, but most of the others that came their way only wanted you to hate iniquity. Mr. Adams had hated iniquity; no doubt about that, when you remembered how he had shaken Nat Burden and crumpled him down on his knees and then had knocked him flat on the ground the night of the fire. And yet there was something different about Mr. Adams' way of hating iniquity. He hated decisively, as final as a clap of thunder. He didn't just nag along with hate. He made it something useful; he did a necessary deed with it, and then he was finished.

But some of these other preachers . . . it seemed like they enjoyed chewin' on hate, like it was a kind of tobacco for the spirit. That kind of hate . . . even if it justified itself because it was turned against evil . . . jest dried you up and made your mind meaner and littler, instead of being a big comfortable place, like a good man's mind ought to be.

The universe itself . . . the stars and the wide frank earth . . . gave you an idea what God's mind was like. Surely a man's mind ought to be roomy and opened, too. God's mind, seemed like, must be as wide as the sky; a man's mind, then, ought to be at least as spacious as the prairie.

They called it Mr. Phelps' Church, and when Amoret heard this she thought her heart would burst with happiness. But when Stephen heard it, he roared with mirth, and finally composed a blasphemous limerick which hurt her so much that for a few days she wished the brick-clay never had been discovered.

His determination to use the first bricks that came out of their kiln to build his own house gave that place a curious appearance, and resulted in their having a great many more rooms than they could possibly use or even furnish. He could see no way of attaching a brick wing to his frame house without making the whole structure lopsided and ridiculous. Then he thought of a bold and original plan. He duplicated the original house and joined the two "wings" with a brick section. He set the second wing to form a wide angle with the first, so that the three sections made a semi-enclosed entrance courtyard. The interior of the brick section was a large formal en-

trance hall, with a central staircase that went up to a gallery leading to either wing. The exterior of this connecting link was centered by a handsome wooden door, hand-carved by a Negro he found in Springfield. As soon as he could possibly afford it, he intended to have a big iron fountain set in his courtyard, and to have the whole space planted with shrubbery and laid out with a banjo-shaped driveway.

Months were required to finish his house, but he kept at it grimly, and the people of Mount Hollow said he'd have ruined himself rather than give in. It might easily have looked like what it was, two houses joined by a brick hyphen, but somehow it escaped the appearance of a malicious afterthought, built out of stubbornness and vanity, with humor nimble enough to laugh at both. When it was finished it was a mansion of undeniable charm. It might be a poor imitation of what you would find among the country seats of Pennsylvania, but it was the handsomest residence in this part of Illinois. No mistake about that.

"It's a true picture of our success out here," he said with mock smugness to Amoret. "Little Harriet has your eyes and my ears, and Stevie has my eyes and your hair. In the same way our house combines my lumber and your bricks. Very appropriate! A love affair between our two businesses, Mrs. Phelps, for all the world to see."

He never would have called them Amoret's bricks to anyone else. Other people in the town spoke of the business as "Miz Phelps' Brickyard," but nobody ever dared say those words to Stephen. For it irked him more than he would admit to himself that it had been she who had stumbled upon the possibilities of the brick-clay on his property. All an accident, obviously. He himself would have got to it later, naturally, when he had time. Matter of fact, it probably would have been developed more advantageously later. The whole thing had come about prematurely, Stephen felt, for his own best interests.

He had not expected to run into trouble with Amoret when he tried to buy the Knights out at his own price. Well, you never can tell about a woman, he thought irritably. If it had been worth making an issue of, he would not have allowed her to interfere. He would have thrown the money down on the desk, and the men could just take their choice; either sell him their so-called "interest" or get off his land entirely. But

Amoret unexpectedly stepped in. More of that nonsense which sometimes spoke out of her, driving him nearly insane with anger, because there was something in her which he could not control as he once had controlled everything about her. This time she said they "owed" the men something besides money.

The whole situation was ridiculous. The Knights had had a good living from the project, and it was obviously the first time in their lives they had succeeded at anything. He had allowed them to live in Joel Adams' old cabin until they could get up some little houses of their own. But it put them entirely on a false basis to have them thinking of themselves as his partners, instead of his employees.

His discomfort and distaste about such vulgarians was every year less acceptable to Amoret, so he addressed his reason for wanting to get rid of the Knights to the mother and not to the humanitarian.

"It's for the children's sake that I don't want our affairs tangled up with them," he said.

"The children? What have they to do with it, Stephen?"

"I can't have our son and daughter making playfellows of those common little immigrants. Living so close to us . . . feeling themselves just as good as we are . . ."

"They are just as good," Amoret said. "We're all immigrants together."

"My children are Phelps. I intend to bring them up like Phelps. If I can't manage that out here in the wilderness, then . . ." He didn't finish the threat at that moment, but that very night he wrote a letter to Stanton Purvis to see what he could do about it.

(2)

It was difficult for Amoret to believe that so many wonderful changes could have come about since that first primitive candle of hers. Changes came out here . . . as fast as you could possibly bring them about. But the greatest transformations of all, she felt, were those inner ones which only you yourself could fully know. She seldom tried now to share with Stephen the great quiet drama which she felt going on all around them, the silent working of God in the

affairs of His men. She knew now that there were many persons like herself, scattered across the centuries. They would always be there, watching the wide, unwritten history of God's work, unfolding and molding, seeming to stand aside sometimes while arrogant worldliness had its way. Never claiming a loud victory, yet enduring from decade to decade. But she was not lonely in her knowledge of it, as she once had been. She heard the Word spoken; she saw it written, sometimes only a footnote to an event. But it was present always. It was there for those with eyes to see it; and many saw.

Often she yearned to draw Stephen close. But he could read the very words, and miss the glow of inner meaning in them. For instance, one evening in their upstairs sitting room, she asked him to read to her while she sewed. He agreed cheerfully, and she handed him the June issue of the *Democratic Monthly Magazine*, opened to an article written by a man named Taylor. He read it glibly; the surface of the words rubbed against the surface of his mind like flint on flint, but no spark leaped between them.

"We can well imagine then, that here in the Great Valley, humanity is to be displayed on a scale of magnificence which has yet been unknown!" the article said.

"I doubt if we'll ever have magnificence that can rival the cities of the East," he remarked when he read that.

"The piece isn't talking about buildings," Amoret said gently. "It says 'humanity' . . . it is talking about magnificence of character."

"Oh. Well, what I'm interested in is something that can be seen," he said impatiently.

"Go on reading, dear."

"We venture the prediction that from what is now called the West . . . the Great Valley . . . is yet to go forth a spirit which shall rouse the nations, reform the civilization of the world . . . and all this is to be accomplished through the agency of the much derided Democratic Principle, as a means in the hand of Him who accomplishes all things in His own good time!"

The words seemed to her the very uttering old Tobias had sought. A prophecy which sprang from the deep consecration of those men, the great and the unknown alike, who animated the divine impulse to set upon the earth a new kind of land.

Many generations might be required, perhaps, before that dream of God became a visible fact. God's plan might be laid over with the dust of indifference; it might lie hidden and despised and even ridiculed, yet sometime . . .

Stephen yawned now and patted his stretched mouth with an apologetic hand. Nothing lulled him into boredom so quickly as vaporizing such as this, he thought with annoyance. "Rousing the nations," indeed . . . "reforming the civilization of the world" . . . as if America ever could do that! Among the older nations America would always be the country cousin with mud on his brogans, foul grammar in his mouth, and a fumbling brain in his skull. Spirit, indeed! It was laughable to imagine that any contribution noble or grand could come from this uncouth Mississippi Valley.

But he didn't argue this with Amoret. He finished the article, and made some perfunctory comment to settle it, then he carried her off to bed, where a pretty woman belonged at this time of night.

Because she could not share what she knew with Stephen, Amoret wished sometimes that Mr. Adams would come back. He would find her better able to talk to him now. What had been only groping then had become a strong inner answer, a vigorous vine that constantly put out new questions to ripen into the fruit of answer. Mr. Adams would be growing also, all this time, yet she knew they would understand each other as they always had, for their growing was from the same root, the same imperishable root.

She often thought of his face tipped upwards as if he were listening. She remembered that lovely noon with the harp, so long ago, so utterly lost. He had seen her joy that day as if it were a garment. He had known that it was more than her pleasure in music; it was knowing the oneness of the sky and the earth, of God listening and also speaking through the music. Later, when she had drowned the harp, he had understood that also. And now . . . wherever he was, did he hear what she heard? There was a silent sweet companionship in trying to imagine how Mr. Adams was looking as he, too, listened to the new syllables of that slow sentence of God speaking across the noise of men.

Was he pleased, as she was, with the first words sent by Samuel F. B. Morse over his rigged-up telegraph line? She had read in Stephen's newspaper how Morse had come to his

discovery by a circuitous, accidental-seeming route. She knew that route herself, for she, too, was traveling on it. Morse had happened to overhear a conversation on a sailing ship on which he was returning from Europe after studying painting. A Boston doctor had chanced to remark that a charge of electricity lost practically no time in traveling a length of wire.

This had inflamed the imagination of the painter, and had made him think for days of nothing else except the mad possibility of sending messages by electricity. For four years then, he had worked . . . living in a tangle of clock parts and wires and a ribbon of paper that unrolled beneath a pencil. Finally he had it, though his invention still looked like debris to the unenvisioned. He had tried to persuade Congress to allow him funds for his experiment. When he failed in that, he had gone to Europe seeking a sponsor. But there they ignored him and laughed at him and stole his patents. Discouraged but not defeated, he came back to America. Now something new had happened in other men's minds. Some vision had seeped into them now, and suddenly Congress appropriated thirty thousand dollars to build a telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore.

You could imagine someone saying to Samuel Morse, "It would be a nice compliment to let the first words you are able to transmit be praise for Congress. Be good business for you." You could imagine Samuel Morse saying nothing to that. Listening, and saying nothing until it was time for him to write those thrilling first words ever to skim along a wire. But he knew what words he had chosen, and why he wanted to send just those.

What hath God wrought!

(3)

It was ironic that Elk Larsen who loved Amoret's two children, should have been helplessly responsible for having them sent away from her.

Elk, if he could have spoken at all, would have said, "Ma'am, I'm purely sorry about that." He would have put that rough quick hand of his on her head and would have tried to comfort her. But Elk was not speaking.

Stevie was ten at this time, an impetuous strong-headed child who did nothing by halves; Harriet was a devoted eight-year-old who reinforced her big brother's whims with fierce feminine shadowing; the various Knight children formed a meek but noisy gallery. Right now Elk was young Stevie's hero, so the whole brood followed Elk about hoping he'd toss them a crumb of his jovial, indifferent attention.

Stephen disliked this very much. If Amoret were a proper mother, he felt, her children would be sitting decorously in some schoolroom, as he seemed to remember he had sat throughout his entire boyhood, learning manners if not actually Latin. They would be riding a horse properly, and not just any which way, slung like limp bags of meal across whatever horse happened to be handy. Harriet would be ringletted and pantaletted; Stevie would be both shy and gallant as a boy should be. You would know when you looked at them that they were the children of gentle people, and not the jerked-up young'uns of gypsies, like the Knight brats.

The whole subject of the children annoyed Stephen. Or rather that subject gave him a focal point for his larger, diffused annoyance. His growing unrest about Amoret, his unsuccessful subjugation of her, was the big millwheel, so to speak, which turned a multitude of small machinery in every part of his life. If things had been right between him and Amoret, everything else would have run smoothly. But his marriage was the power which moved everything else for him, and since that had somehow gone off-center, nothing gave him satisfaction. He could not rail at the marriage; he had too much erotic vanity for that. Besides, he was helpless to change it, and what Stephen could not change he chose to ignore. What he could change and what he could storm about, however, was everything else which sprang from that marriage. . . .

"You're only half as interested in the children as you are in that damnable brickyard," he said sometimes. "If you cared half as much for their welfare as you do for it, you wouldn't let them run wild as they do."

She looked at him and tried to know what ached in him, which drove him to making such absurd and groundless charges. She went over to him and kissed him tenderly, as if he himself were her own small son.

"You know that isn't true," she said, smoothing back his

hair. "The children are the happiest people on earth. Listen to them now, down at the mill, wh ooping and laughing."

"That's exactly it," he said. "Whooping like Indians. How could we ever take such little ruffians East for my friends to see? I'd be ashamed of them."

"And of me, too," Amoret said softly. "You'd be ashamed of me, too, Stephen. But perhaps we won't be going East for a few years, dear."

Stephen felt that the three of them, Amoret and Stevie and Harriet, sometimes appeared to be in a light-hearted conspiracy against him. They understood each other without words, it seemed to him. Under all their courtesy and affection which they dutifully gave him, he imagined they laughed at him a little, at his importance and his success in the town. Of the many disappointments he had had in his life, he sometimes thought his children were the most cutting of all.

Sometimes he caught himself wishing they had not been born. Not yet, anyway. Not until they could be reared to become a credit to him. In addition to their offense of reminding him that he was failing to produce aristocrats to give the world, he had another claim against them. Far from being a bond between him and Amoret, his children were really an obtrusion. It seemed to him he had less of his wife every year. With the irrationality of unhappiness, he simultaneously accused her of neglecting the children, and also of idolizing them to the exclusion of all else.

He grumbled and nagged at the little boy and girl, and kept them sitting beside his chair for an hour after dinner, while they stumbled through Latin conjugations. Naturally the more irritable and dissatisfied he became with them, the more friskily they bounded off when they could, running pell-mell to the mill, with their noisy devotion held out before them in their grubby little hands for anyone who would accept it. Elk accepted it cheerfully, for his own young'uns, he said, were too big now to enjoy any more. Elk sometimes even gave them jobs to do in the mill, and this especially infuriated Stephen.

"Why, shucks, Mr. Phelps," Elk protested when Stephen forbade this, "nothin' makes young'uns feel so good as gittin' the idea they're helpin' with a little useful work."

The children, their hair white with meal, would tug and strain at the bags with their father's name splashed across

them, and the two little rosebuds which Stephen had forgotten were once his favorite amorous symbol. But they did no hauling or helping when he was present. When Stephen was around, they were quiet, well-behaved little hypocrites, smiling uneasily if they met his eye and scuttling out of his way, for fear he'd send them back to some dull book.

Stephen was often away from the mill now, for his business horizon had enlarged considerably. He supervised much of the building done in the town, and even drew up the plans with his own lavish ideas, when the owners would allow this. Also, he was a partner in the banking business of Twicker and Dane. None of them had anticipated that the general store would ever branch out into a banking business, but as Mount Hollow grew, and more and more money accumulated, Mr. Twicker fell into the habit of accommodating his customers by locking up their extra cash in his drawer for safekeeping. The general store bought pork from the farmers at two cents a pound, and shipped it to the East in barrels of brine, and this resulted in establishing credits and surpluses, which finally demanded that Twicker buy an iron safe for the back room of the store.

"I don't aim to go into the banking business," he said to Stephen. "I don't know nothin' about sech things, Mr. Phelps."

"I do," Stephen said. "I was weaned on a bank book." As he said the words, he thought wryly how repugnant such a phrase would have been to him once. But now he spoke such words freely, for earthy humor was the currency most negotiable out here. Even while he was thinking this, he was also seeing a new firm name, "Phelps, Twicker, and Dane, Bankers." It was a puny little business now, only an upstairs room, but Stephen hoped it would sometime crowd the store out of its quite presentable brick building on Main Street.

On the day of the ice jam, Stephen had driven into Springfield to investigate a mortgage for the new bank. That was how it happened he was not at the mill during the emergency. The river had been badly swollen for several days, with huge flying blocks of ice crashing down past the dam. The children, naturally, were enchanted with the noise and tumult of the river so threateningly big and ferocious. They hung over the window sills of their father's mill office, screaming and pointing.

"Here comes a big steamboat . . . make out like that big piece is a boat," Stevie was shouting. "Look't those people on deck . . . they're screaming, 'Save me . . . save me . . . I'm *drowning!*'"

"Is anybody going to save them?" little Oliver Knight gasped. "Is anybody, Stevie?"

"Naw . . . they're going to drowned," Stevie said, "every last one of them . . . look, there comes a bigger steamboat . . . that's going to drowned, too."

"Let's get Mr. Larsen to save them," Harriet cried, her eyes enormous and terrified with the imagining. "I can't stand it unless somebody tries to save them, Stevie."

"Hush up," Stevie said. "If you're going to be a crybaby you go on home. Just be quiet and watch 'em drowned."

Then they heard a roar from below, and it was Elk's voice calling up to them. "Come down here, Stevie, and give me a hand," Elk was shouting. "That there ice is jamming up against our southeast pillar. I've got to do something about it. You git down here quick."

Stevie, always important, left the window and clattered down the stairs, shouting to the other children to stay where they were. If there *was* going to be something exciting happening, he didn't want a lot of babies underfoot. And yet . . . on the other hand, if he was going to do something big, might as well have an audience see it.

"Well, come on then," he said exactly as if they were insisting. "But you've got to stay out of my way, you know."

They all left the window then and scampered down the stairs and along the loading platform to the retaining wall on the other side of the road, on which the platform rested. From here they could see under the mill, where the two big wooden wheels were ponderously revolving, turning one horizontal shaft under the saw on one side, and another horizontal to the grist mill on the other.

Mr. Larsen, with a long pole, had edged his way perilously out along the supports to the pillar which was holding back an angry horde of ice, trying to jam into the wheels. To the children the ice seemed a jungle full of ravening beasts, fighting each other for a chance to gnaw down the mill.

"Somethin' terrible's happening!" one of the Knights shrieked. "I better run over to the brickyard and get Poppa." But he was too transfixed by the sight to move a step.

Elk then changed his mind about the safety of having the little boy come out on the narrow timber behind him. "Don't come out here, Stevie," Elk called out. "You stay back there, until I tell you what to do."

The ice was mounting higher; you could almost see the big wooden pillar shivering with the weight of the jam. But it wouldn't crack; it was filled with stone, Papa said. He said it would hold back a herd of elephants if ever it had to. But it wasn't holding back the herd of ice . . . Without any warning, except a kind of moan you could hear even above the thunder of the ice, the pillar splintered and crumbled.

Mr. Larsen was standing close to the pillar, and it looked for a minute as if he had splintered and crumbled too. The ice crushed around him, and then snapped off the huge beam which ran from the water wheel up to the floor, where the wooden cog wheels and the burrs were.

Mr. Larsen was crumpled over on his knees now, and it looked as if the whole mill were resting its weight on him. His face was whiter than the snow, and one of his arms was dangling and swinging like a doll's arm. Stevie, on his hands and knees, crept out along the support, and began tugging at him, crying and gasping and cursing because he was only a little boy in a moment that needed a man's strength. The children along the wall screamed. Little Harriet vomited helplessly, because she saw that one of the splinters from the pillar had stabbed into Mr. Larsen, and was holding him like a fish on a gaff . . .

The rest of the day was a bruise and a smear and a nightmare for everyone. The end of it seemed an eternity away from its innocent, usual beginning. By nightfall everyone in Mount Hollow knew that Elk Larsen was probably going to die from the wooden spike that had torn through his back and pierced his lung.

The Knight children had walked all the way over to the Larsens' house, and sat like four bedraggled blackbirds on the stoop, unconsolable and unmovable. But the Phelps children had reacted differently. Stevie, as soon as the men had come and bodily dragged him off the beam so that they could move Elk, had run off somewhere by himself into the woods and couldn't be found until long after dark when Amoret found him lying under a tree, half-frozen and still stunned with hor-

ror and nausea. Harriet, retching and quivering, sobbed without a tear, even after she had finally dropped off to sleep, safe in her own bed.

"If Papa had been there, it wouldn't have happened," she said, over and over.

Abner Popel stationed himself beside the road, at the turn-off to the Larsen house to intercept Stephen when he returned from Springfield. "Mr. Phelps, somethin' awful has happened," he said, when Stephen stopped his mud-spattered buggy to see what his unwelcome employee wanted. "I can't hardly bear to tell you."

"Well, get it out, for God's sake!" Stephen cried impatiently. "Mrs. Phelps? . . ."

"No, sir, It's Mr. Larsen, sir. He got hurt at the mill today. He's mighty low, Bert says. They got him wrapped in bear grease but . . ."

"How did he get hurt?"

"They was a ice jam against one of the supports of the mill. You better drive up there and see Mr. Larsen, sir, if you're ever going to see him." He scrambled up over the wheel and slumped down on the seat beside Stephen, wiping his damp nose sorrowfully with the back of his hand.

"An ice jam? Did it do any damage?"

"Considerable," Adner said. "It knocked one of the supports clean to kindling wood. But Mr. Larsen . . ."

Stephen smacked the reins on the horse and started him trotting along the road, ignoring the cut-off to the Larsen place. "I'll have to get home and attend to it," he said. "Liable to wreck the wheels, and jam the whole thing . . ."

"Mr. Phelps, sir, if you don't turn back and speak to Mr. Larsen, you'll never see him alive," the dim-witted man said. But he said it in a voice which Stephen had never heard him use before; he spoke with a cold authority, quite unlike the half-giggling, slobbering quaver that usually foamed around his words. Stephen turned his head and looked into the uncoordinated, empty face, and something he saw in it made his own face slowly swarm with color. He pulled up the reins of the horse so that the animal reared in surprise and backed his rump against the buckboard.

"Why in God's name couldn't you say so?" Stephen mut-

tered angrily. "You don't talk so a man can understand you, Popel."

"You understood me all right," Abner said, and settled his stubbly chin in his dirty 'possum collar.

Stephen thought, "I'll have to get rid of that half-wit. The man makes a brute out of me. He hates me for some reason, and that makes me act the way he expects me to."

During the rest of the way back to the Larsen house, neither man had anything to say.

"Probably only a sprain or something," Stephen grumbled to himself, by way of reassurance, as he got tremblingly out of his carriage in the Larsens' dooryard. The Knight children, chilled to the bone, tear-streaked and forlorn, scattered when he stepped upon the stoop, as if they had been derelict birds.

Inside the house, sorrow was a guest who had crowded out everything else. It was long past supper time, but there was no sight of food. Emily, Tom, and Joey, and the long-legged, fourteen-year-old Nora, were huddled in the dark kitchen. Opal, her face almost luminous with emotion, was standing, as she had stood for hours, beside Elk's bed. Elk's face was misted over with the agony of which he was no longer conscious. His stocky body looked amazingly small and withered under the quilts. Stephen put his arm around Opal and spoke as consolingly as possible.

"He's terrible bad," Opal said dazedly. "Ef he was to die, Mr. Phelps . . ."

"He won't die," Stephen said. "Elk wouldn't be caught dead dying, Opal." It was one of Elk's own sayings. He wouldn't be caught dead wearing gloves; he wouldn't be caught dead chewin' store tobacco. A flicker of normal amusement passed across Opal's glazed eyes as she realized the dear absurdity of what Stephen had said about his old friend.

"He's been such a good husband to me," she said in a rush. "He always wanted to give me everything I wanted. He never wanted nothin' himself. And he ain't never had nothin' yet. If he dies now . . ."

She was grieving for him as if he were already dead. Her heart was already cut with his bitter epitaph. "He never wanted nothin'," it said. "And he died without havin' nothin'."

Before he even realized what he was doing, Stephen

reached into his pocket and took out the old watch. "He wanted *this*," he said. "I always meant to give it to him, Opal." He put the watch, warm from his strong, young body, into her hand and bent her fingers around it.

"I can't let you do that, Mr. Phelps!" she said in a perfunctory, dutiful denial, holding the watch close.

"That's the only thing I ever knew Elk to want," Stephen said, unconsciously using Elk's vernacular instead of his own customary speaking. "I always wanted to give it to him, but someway I just never found the chance to do it. You give it to him now. You tell him to get up out of bed and begin wearin' his new watch, ma'am."

She held the watch against her breast, and looked up into Stephen's face. For the first time since they had carried Elk home, a slow drizzle of tears came down her pain-parched face and eased it briefly.

"You're an awful good man, Mr. Phelps," she said in a whisper. "Elk always said you was one of the finest men he ever hoped to meet up with."

(4)

Before the next morning broke, Tom drove into the Phelps' fancy courtyard and rapped respectfully on the big white door. When Stephen looked down from his chamber window and recognized who it was, he came down immediately and let the boy in.

"What is it, son?"

Tom's eyes were like scorched holes in his white tired face. "Pa wanted me to thank you kindly for the watch, sir," he said. "I guess you know what-all he thought of it."

"But . . ."

"He told me that ef he was to die . . . ever . . . he wanted to will the watch back to you, Mr. Phelps, sir," he said. He held out the watch to Stephen and in the wavering light of the candle, Stephen saw the beloved gold of the watch wink at him.

"You better take it, sir," Tom mumbled. "It's yours, sir."

Yes, it was his again. He took it into his left hand. It was cold from the long ride in Tom's pocket.

After it was all over, the thing which stood out most clearly to Stephen was his children's horror. For days they drooped around the house, unwilling to go near the mill, unwilling to play at anything. At night sometimes little Harriet woke up screaming, and when Amoret had comforted her, she lay shivering and silent, her dark eyes forbidding anyone to speak of what she was thinking.

"This has made up my mind for me," Stephen said at last. "I've known for some time that I ought to do it, and now I've decided."

"Decided what?"

"I can't bring up my children in this barbarous wilderness. They're Phelpses, after all."

"You mean we'll leave all this? We'll go East?"

He looked at her while he briefly considered how best to tell her; then he said, "No, of course not. We're just on the verge of starting a real fortune out here. We can't leave now."

"Then what?"

"Stanton Purvis has offered to give the children a proper home with his family for a few years . . . He wants to make up for what he did to me . . ."

"You mean, I'd have to leave you . . . and live with the Purvises?"

A wild dart of pleasure shot through him at the instinctive rejection in her words. (It was only later that the sweetness in them turned to poison as he realized that, though her first protest was against leaving him, so closely was her heart knit to the children, she did not even consider that she could be separated from *them*.)

"Of course you'll not leave me, my darling," he said. "That would be as unthinkable to me as it is to you."

"Then what?"

"We'll send the children East."

"You mean alone?"

"Naturally not," he said patiently. "I'll engage some reliable woman to travel with them. I may even ask Mrs. Durkee to come out and get them." Then in his mind he quickly

rejected Mrs. Durkee; it would not do to have her see this primitive living. As long as he wrote about it to her, he could make it sound fairly gay and adventuresome. But if she saw it . . . "She's pretty old for traveling," he added. "Perhaps Harriet would leave that inn of hers, and come visit us awhile and take them back with her. We'll find a suitable way, my dear."

"But in Philadelphia? You mean, *they'd live there?*"

"Don't sound so tragic about it," he laughed impatiently. "The children of aristocrats are often brought up away from their parents, my dear. You were yourself, you know."

"But that was different. That couldn't be helped, Stephen. And I died . . . I died of loneliness."

He took her tenderly in his arms. His whole body was blazing with an unexpected knowledge of what this move of his was going to mean between them. He saw it now suddenly as the opportunity he had been seeking for a long time. Without the children, she would turn her full love toward him again. All that old ardor which now she frittered away in silly little mothering ways, would belong to him again.

The human mind is an intricate mechanism, he thought while he was holding her close. Pascal had said it well, "*The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of.*"

He had believed he was thinking solely of the children's own good, and of what he wanted to make of them for the world's sake. But now he realized that under that determination lay a deeper, more savage reason for his instinct in wanting to send them away. A lover's reason. But he could not speak of that now. He would have to wait until he possessed Amoret fully again. Then he would tell her, and she would understand. She would pretend to be shocked because he had been jealous of his own children, but in her enslaved heart, she would be glad. When she mused on it alone, she would be triumphantly pleased, for a beloved woman is a mate first and a mother only second.

"I couldn't let my children be lonely . . . the way I was," she said. "I couldn't bear to think of them crying themselves to sleep, the way I used to."

"It made an ardent woman of you, my darling," he said. "Don't you see? That's why you're a magnificent woman. You never indulged any childish love in your life. You had to wait

. . . you were starved so that you could appreciate the real feast . . .”

She thought she would swoon in his arms with repugnance at what he was saying. She turned her head away from his seeking, importunate mouth, but he kissed her throat and moved back the frill of starched muslin to follow with his lips along her shoulder. Then he modulated his appeal to meet her weakness.

“You’re too good a mother to think only of your own loneliness when your children’s needs are to be considered,” he said, sketching her attitude for her in a suggesting, cajoling voice. “You can see how all this violence has hurt them.”

He let his soothing voice run on, caressing her mother’s reason with a silken hand. But underneath he was thinking that perhaps there *was* something in all that trash she and the other religious persons babbled about! Perhaps if you were really unselfish about it, as he had been in considering the children’s welfare, some greater, more delicious good came back to you! Intoxicating unexpected profit, like having his wife to himself again . . .

“It will be lonely for me, too, Amoret, to give them up,” he said to her, and as he heard the words, he meant them. A mistiness came into his eyes, as he remembered his small daughter’s petal-like lips pronouncing Latin verbs. And his son, that stalwart boy in his own image and likewise . . . he had been quite splendid about trying to rescue poor Elk. A father loved his children; a woman didn’t really understand that mixture of fierce pride and responsibility, and plain animal fondness. It would not be entirely easy sending them to Stanton.

“We’ll have to make it up to each other, Amoret. We’ll have only what we started with . . . just the two of us . . . We’ll have to love each other even more, my darling. . . .”

CHAPTER THREE

One Tuesday morning in March the word came running through the town like the first warm hint after a winter's bleakness. By night there wasn't a house which hadn't been thawed by the news; even the families who had come lately felt richer.

A child heard the news first and hurried into Twicker and Dane's to tell it. "They's a caravan of people on their way to California lookin' for gold, and it's stopped down near our north lot," he cried. "They's a man among 'em says he used to live in this here town afore it was much of anything. I didn't ketch his name very good." Nobody needed to ketch his name very good; their hope told them who it was. All the customers in the store gathered around, their eyes lighted with excitement.

"You think it could be?" they asked each other quickly.

"Couldn't be him," they said, unwilling to believe until they knew for sure. "Mr. Adams sure would have writ us to say."

So Mr. Twicker himself got into his carriage, which was usually tied up at the hitching post, and drove out to the Artors' farm where the caravan of thirteen mule-drawn wagons had pitched a camp. Before he had quite stopped his horse he shouted, "You got a gentleman here by the name of Adams? A preacher?"

"We got a Adams, but he ain't a preacher," a sunburned old man said. "Our Adams is a blacksmith."

"Blacksmith, hmm? Can't be the same man. Sorry to hear that. I had hoped . . ." Five or six little boys who had collected to watch what was going to happen, scampered off to the rear of the encampment, calling Mr. Adams as they ran.

Mr. Twicker said afterwards that he wouldn't have known Joel Adams if he had come upon him unexpectedly. Everybody said that, and then everybody agreed that as soon as he turned his eyes on you and began to talk to you, you'd a-knowed him anywheres. If he'd a-been wearin' another body

altogether, some of them said, they'd a-knowed Mr. Adams soon as he began to talk to them.

He was older, of course; but then everybody was older. His hair looked as if two white goosequills had grown into it. They stood up on either side of his forehead, rakish-looking as the horns the devil is supposed to wear. Mr. Adams' face had an entirely new expression, a kind of mischievous, outlandish look. But it was only a momentary disguise. Didn't fool anybody. For his eyes had the same kindness, except that they had sunk into their pockets a little deeper, as if the wisdom in them were some valuable coin which must be kept safe. His face was darker and thinner, or maybe it only seemed that way because of those white little horns above his soberness. His mouth had a gash of deep wrinkle beside it, as if he had set his teeth and then smiled. He had the same gentle voice, a laughing, waiting voice that halted between his words sometimes as if he were listening to what somebody was telling him to say, and then saying it carefully.

When he recognized Mr. Twicker, he ran forward, and Mr. Twicker jumped out of his carriage, and the two of them threw their arms around each other.

"You should have written us," Mr. Twicker said.

"I didn't rightly know whether you'd remember me or not," Joel Adams said, with that shy one-sided grin of his. "A lot must have happened to the town since I left."

"A lot has. But the worst thing that has happened to us was your leaving."

Mr. Adams stood off and gazed solemnly at the man to see if he was only joking. Mr. Twicker was looking deep into his face, and seeing in his old friend's eyes that his own hair had gone white. (It was the first time Mr. Twicker really had realized that about his hair.)

"There ain't hardly been a day when somebody hasn't said to me that we ought to have you back here."

"You're kind to say that, sir," Mr. Adams said with dignity. "But I guess it's only kindness."

"No, it's the truth," the storekeeper said. Then both of them were embarrassed because the conversation had seemed to become unexpectedly full of feeling. Both men drew back and looked around at the prospectors who had forgotten their manners entirely and now were standing close and frankly listening. Nothing would do then, but that Mr. Adams would

get immediately into the carriage and drive into town with the storekeeper.

"I hardly look fitten, sir," Joel Adams said. "You'll have to wait until I can get myself dressed up. At least as much dressed up as I'm able to. You see, we don't aim to be visiting much on our way."

"I suppose you're planning to go all the way to California?"

"Or bust," Joel grinned.

"It may be bust then," Mr. Twicker said jovially. "I'm not sure the neighbors are going to give you up easily, now that we've got you back." Joel hung his head at these words, as if he were afraid of the look that might be in his eyes.

"Anyway, you come on and see what we've made out of this town of ours."

On the way into Mount Hollow, Joel asked about all the families. Twicker told him everything he could think of. But there was one family he didn't ask about, and Mr. Twicker said humorously to himself, "He's goin' to bite off his tongue afore he asks about *them*. And I'm going to bite off mine afore I tell him without he does ask."

When they finally drew up before the fine brick building where the store was, Joel let his eye run delightedly around the whole square. "My, I wouldn't have said such a thing could happen," he said. Then his eye stumbled over the neat black and white sign lettered up above the store window.

"Phelps, Twicker, and Dane, Bankers."

The lean face colored then, and the pointed tongue came out of the side of the mouth in an old impish grimace which Twicker had forgotten was part of the preacher. Now, with the mischievous white tufts in his dark hair, it gave him an audacious look he'd never had when he was younger.

"Well, I see you've got yourself a new partner," he said at last diffidently.

"Yep," Twicker said with all caution.

"So the mill was too much work for him," he said sadly. "He gave it up and became a banker."

"He didn't give up nothin'," Mr. Twicker cried with vehemence. "There's hardly a thing you can rest your eye on in this here town that hasn't got some mark of him on it!" He pointed to the freight office across the square where a wagon

was being loaded this morning with one of Stephen's shipments of meal. "If you could see good enough, you'd read his name on every bag," Twicker said, "and those fancy frills on that building over there . . . the whole building, in fact . . ."

"You mean he's got a *lumber* mill?"

Twicker nodded, and tossed his thumb eloquently at the rest of the buildings. "All built by him," he said grimly.

Joel let his eyes slip questioningly to Mr. Twicker's face, to see what total it registered. The storekeeper was grinning ruefully, still not willing to reveal fully what he thought about his partner.

"Oh, he's made the town prosperous, all right," he muttered. But by the cryptic words, he intimated a long chapter left unsaid.

The next sentence from Joel Adams was addressed to himself. "Well, he stuck to what he started, anyway," he said. "He didn't run away . . . the way some lesser men do."

Mr. Twicker looked quickly at him. It had been on the tip of his tongue to ask Joel how he had spent the years since he went away. But now he saw it would be better not to ask. The smile faded from his face, for he saw behind Joel's eyes the saddest sight on earth, a man who has failed himself and cannot forgive the treachery.

(2)

The coming of the caravan brought to Mount Hollow the wild discontents which were the very wings of this gold greed. California had seemed remote and fabulous and far-off before, something to be dreaming about furtively with no danger of the dream drawing you into its clutches. But now here were people just like themselves, camping on the very edge of their town, filled with the unction of greed, in love with the lean present because the future's sleek roundness lay within their very reach. Everyone had been talking for months about the gold fever which was raging across the whole country. Even Europe was not immune to it, for it was said that in London alone there were five companies with a capital of six million dollars which had been formed to help

British prospectors fare forth to California. Horace Greeley in the *New York Tribune* was shouting in extravagant rhetoric:

It is coming . . . nay at hand. There is no doubt of it. We are on the very brink of the Age of Gold. We look for an addition, within the next four years, equal to at least one thousand millions of dollars to the general aggregate of gold in circulation.

One thousand million . . . it stretched your skull to think of such a figure. It made you discontented with the puny profits possible from your own hard work. What was the use of slaving for a few trickles, while there were men having the time of their lives out in California, scooping up hatfuls of gold dust for the mere effort of bending over!

Stephen said that if the hours of wasted work squandered in Mount Hollow listening to the tales that wafted back from these adventurers could have been laid end to end, the town could have built itself a handsome park with a bandstand in the center like some other towns had. But who wanted a park and a bandstand when there were settlements mushrooming up in the far West that had gold glittering in the very gullies!

Everybody had his favorite story. Lem James' brother wrote about a company of men who saw gold on the surface of the ground. They ran and flung themselves down, with arms and legs outstretched, claiming pre-emption on as much surface as they could cover. The people from Ohio, camping out on the Artors' place, told about a deserting soldier who happened upon a rock of solid gold that weighed 839 pounds and 11 and one half ounces. He was afraid to leave it, so he sat on it for sixty-seven days, nearly starving to death. Tormenters came and danced around him, eating gluttonously, hoping he would finally succumb and leap off his treasure. But he clung fast, drooling his way past all temptations. Finally a squatter with a big plate of pork and beans nearly got him. They carried on a kind of auction; every hour the starving millionaire resisted, the price rose on the beans, until the asking price was two thousand and seven hundred dollars. At last the rock-sitter could bear it no longer.

"All right . . . bring 'em over here, quick, afore I famish," he croaked.

But suddenly the man with the plate of beans got mad. "You jest set there and rot, if you're so stingy you won't pay a decent price for good victuals, out of all that wealth under your tail," he shouted. Then he dumped the beans out on the ground and stamped upon them.

Even if you didn't believe the stories entirely, you couldn't help being excited at the tantalizing beckoning of gold in all of them. Any time your own work was especially tedious, or your home boundaries tiresome and restrictive, you just naturally found your mind packing up and heading out to Saint Joseph, which was the nearest point on the Mormon Trail, where the smaller parties converged to form big trains to cross the wilderness.

Two or three ne'er-do-wells, the youngest of the James boys, and the Junham twins, did actually leave town, headed for the West. The thriftier citizens said among themselves they were just the kind of men you'd find trekking out after gold. People who couldn't make anything amount to anything were always looking for gold of one sort or another, they said scornfully. But with the coming of the caravan which brought Mr. Adams, they had to alter their complacent ideas about the kind of people who go seeking gold. Mr. Adams wouldn't be found among no-gooders, they said loyally, even before they got acquainted with the people of the caravan. Maybe there *was* something to all this after all. . . .

Anyway, whether there was or not, they were mighty glad gold had been found in California, because it brought Mr. Adams back to them. Nobody seemed to consider for a moment that he was merely passing through the town on his way to fortune and adventure. If he was here, they were just naturally going to keep him. Everyone took that for granted . . .

"Once he sees the church we built for him, he'll stay," they said confidently. "After all, it wouldn't be like God to help us git the church ready for Mr. Adams, if He wasn't planning on sending him along in good time."

Everything, they felt, had worked out just right for them. Mr. Adams had been brought accidentally, or rather Mr. Phelps' getting the public highway to pass this way instead of five miles to the south the way it almost had been laid out, had brought the preacher here. He arrived at just the right time, not last month when they had that stuck-up Swede rav-

ing and ding-donging at them. Nor next July, when the State Board had promised them a minister of their own.

"Happens mighty lucky we're between two preachers. That shows you right there that God's got the whole thing planned out nice and right."

"Besides, what would a man like Mr. Adams want with gold?" they asked each other reasonably. "He's got everything right here a man could want . . . good friends, his own house standin' jest as he left it, and his church waitin' fer him."

But after that first visit to the town with Mr. Twicker, Joel Adams avoided Mount Hollow. Seemed like he wouldn't let himself understand how they felt about him. Seemed like he was afraid to come near them. And they baked everything in their kitchens that they remembered him liking, and running from house to house reminding each other of the fine things he used to tell them! There never was a man with such a huge balance of affection banked away in the hearts of a town, they said humbly to each other. And him acting like a pauper! The families that loved him long ago drove out to the edge of town where the caravan was. Several of them had a child named Joel they wanted to show him. The fact that these namesakes ranged in age from eight years down to a few months, showed how faithful had been their remembrance and their love.

It just didn't seem possible he couldn't see how they felt about having him back. They couldn't *beg* him; that wouldn't be fitten. They could only show him their need, and hope that he might want to fill it as he once had. But he seemed not to see. "Reckon we oughtn't add to his burden by tormenting him to stay here if he don't want to stay," they said humbly. "'Course what he could have is some woman back where he come from who ain't goin' to be satisfied without he brings her back a lot of that there gold."

They asked him if he was married, and he said, smiling down into their eyes, "Not yet."

That could have meant a lot, or it could have meant nothing. But one thing they did know; a man like the preacher was always on the verge of bein' married. There was nothing bachelory about the preacher. The littlest child could see that. There are some men just naturally made for lovin' a woman and bringin' up a fine batch of young'uns.

A natural-born bachelor gets used to his state. But the

preacher, wherever he lived, would always be getting ready for his home and his woman, and even his children. And you could bet your bottom dollar that there would always be one or two women, wherever he passed, that would be thinking night and day about the man-sweetness of him, wonderin' how she could get a-holt of it for herself.

"What we ought to do is ask him to preach jest once in our church," they said craftily. "Once he stood at that white pulpit . . . why, a preacher'd jest naturally want to fill that pulpit the way a woman would want to put a nice baby in a fine little cradle some good man had made with his own hands."

The church members sent a committee of ladies out on Thursday to ask him would he come next Sunday and preach 'em a sermon. He looked around at them, stripping the cobwebs of the years from their faces so he could recognize them quickly. He looked as if he was expecting to see somebody else's face half-hidden by their bonnets . . . But there was only Opal Larsen and Mrs. Junham and Mrs. Burden's sister, Lizzie (now Mrs. Tait), all a bit breathless at the thought of seeing Mr. Adams. They stumbled through their invitation with heavy casualness. He listened and then he shook his head.

"I can't do it," he said slowly, not meeting anyone's eye. "I haven't preached a sermon for a good many years now."

"That don't make no difference," they said staunchly. "You'd be only talkin' to your friends, Mr. Adams. Your old friends and some new ones waiting to git acquainted with you."

"No . . . a man who sets himself up to preach in a church has to be specially called and properly ordained," he said.

"Remember how you used to talk in my parlor?" Mrs. Junham said. "Some of the best words I ever heard afore or since was said in my own parlor."

"That was different. That was in the time when we all jest had to turn to, and do whatever needed to be done."

Opal broke in, her black clothes quivering with her earnestness. "Things still need to be done. We all got more earthly possessions than we used to have, Mr. Adams, but some way . . ."

"I know, Opal," he said gently. "I was coming over tonight to see you and the children. I just heard about Elk."

"If Elk was here, he wouldn't take 'no,'" Opal said, dabbing at her eyes with her proper black-bordered handker-

chief. But still he shook his head and though he smiled, you could see he wished with all his heart that the caravan hadn't picked this particular stopping place to wait while the grass greened up along the Mormon Trail to feed the animals.

The caravan could so easily have stopped in some other town, and he could have passed through here with no one but himself knowing what it meant. He could have seen the brick buildings and that church with the white spire . . . he might even have had a glimpse of the old cabin he had built with his own hands, for they said the road went right past the Phelps Mills. He might even have seen Amoret on that hill, shading her eyes to watch strangers pass . . . He had tried to keep the caravan pushing toward Beardstown. If he had let things take their course, they probably would have made their resting stop there.

"Beardstown's on the Illinois River. We'll find a much better camping ground there," he had said when the Bascom brothers, who were leading the company, suggested they camp right here in the Artors' pasture. "It's much better than this," he said, too enthusiastically. His very eagerness precipitated the thing he wanted to avoid.

"How'd you know, Joel?"

"Why, I know this country."

Then they remembered that way back in Ohio he had mentioned that nine or ten years ago he had lived in Illinois.

"Where was that you lived, Joel?" they asked him.

"Wasn't any town," he said, trying to be casual. "I just had a place in the wilderness. I didn't even own the land. Just stopped there awhile."

"Well, where *was it*?" they asked with that thoroughly American infatuation with geographical preciseness. "Where was it *near*?"

He had tried to get out of saying. Without lying, of course. He couldn't lie. He could do plenty of other things, but he couldn't lie.

"Why . . . why, I guess . . . why, the fact is, it was somewhere right around near here, I reckon."

"Why didn't you say so? Right near here, hmm? Well, that's a funny thing. Maybe you'll meet up with some of your old neighbors. Maybe they'll make things pleasant for all of us!" So that decided them! Nothing hidden that shall not be revealed, he thought wretchedly.

Now he looked into the hot pinched faces of these three little women, prodding at the sorest place in his heart. Opal had been watching him, while the others fumbled uneasily with their cotton gloves, which they never could wear without itching, it seemed.

"Mr. Adams has his own reasons," she said gently. "I don't think we ought to nag at him, ef he don't want us to."

The people in the caravan invited the ladies to stay and eat dinner with them, but the three of them drove back to Mount Hollow, silent and bewildered and a little bit hurt.

Lizzie Tait was frankly crying during the last mile.

"It jest seems like it was all my fault," she said.

"Why, you ain't had a thing to do with it."

"It all come out of Nat's burnin' down the Phelps' house and that was really on account of me," she said, clinging to the one legend in her life which had added dazzle to her drabness.

"Shucks, it wasn't on account of you! It was on account of Mrs. Phelps," Mrs. Junham said impatiently. "The preacher never paid you any real attention, Lizzie."

"But he would of," Lizzie said. "A woman knows those things better than anybody else. But when Nat burned down the house . . ."

"Shucks, more good than bad come out of that burnin', though I wouldn't want to say so publicly," Mrs. Junham said. "The whole town gained a lot by it. All we lost was our preacher, you might say. And now God's give us our second chance to git *him* back."

Opal said, "I've thought a lot about what came out of that burnin'. I don't reckon the Phelps would ever have had their fine mill ef Mr. Phelps hadn't made up his mind he'd show this town what he could do, oncet he put his mind on it. And ef he hadn't had his mill, I'd still have had . . ."

Continuing home alone in her own wagon, Opal stopped to see Amoret, as she always did when she passed the big house. Funny, that nobody had thought to invite Miz Phelps to go out along with them to ask the preacher . . . She was the one you'd naturally think would have been picked to go. She drew back with loyal modesty about prying too deeply into why Amoret had not been asked. All that silly talk, the night of the burnin'! Elk had stepped right out beside the preacher and had said his say. Elk would have broken Nat Burden's

jaw gladly, if Mr. Adams had given him the sign to do it. Her pinched, bereaved little heart burgeoned with pride as she remembered how Elk looked standing beside the preacher, his face red and furious, his white hair bristling.

"Ef you don't want to soil your hands, sir," he had said to Mr. Adams. But the preacher soiled his hands all right. And more than his hands. Could it be that he had never yet recovered from that night, as the rest of them had?

She drove into the fancy driveway in front of the Phelps house. Miz Phelps' lilac which one of the neighbors had brought her the day of the Raisin' was leafing out nice. Along its dark branches, tiny buds of leaves glistened like green carved stones. Jade, maybe. Miz Phelps had moved it from beside the old well and had it set in the place of honor among the shrubs and trees that Mr. Phelps was so proud of. It was a big bush now, and when it bloomed in June, you could smell it clean out on the highway as you drove in. It had been only a twig when it was given to Miz Phelps, a homesick little twig something like herself. The two of them had growed up together; you might say. When Mrs. Phelps bloomed, there was a fragrance about her, also . . . a kind of spiritual fragrance . . .

But lately there was something almost heartbreaking about Miz Phelps. She kept herself busy; her husband had all kinds of fashionable clothes sent from St. Louis for her to dress herself up in. She looked just as young, seems like, as the day she'd come floundering through the spring mud up to Opal's door. All them petticoats . . . She'd had a good romantic life. She'd taken a-holt of things and made something of everything she touched. Opal never would forget the first corn dodger she made. Hard as a rock it was, and lumpy. But she was so proud of it, you couldn't help laughing.

She had come a long way since that corn dodger; she'd made a lot of things since then. First of all, she'd made a man out of her husband. But that was one of the achievements you'd never be able to count out loud. Nobody but another woman who had been in a position to watch the whole thing happen, would realize what it had meant to make a man out of Mr. Phelps. Miz Phelps would deny being responsible if anybody, even her best friend, Opal Larsen, would ever accuse her of it.

Miz Phelps was very proud of her husband. That, proba-

bly, was the whole secret of how she had accomplished all she had with him. You can do anything with a man if you're proud enough of him, Opal thought admiringly. But you've got to be a big woman yourself to keep your pride big. Seems like a woman's pride is a kind of mold for a man if he loves her enough. He'll stretch himself to fit into it, if he kin. Once he fills up that mold, why naturally he'll quit stretchin' himself. So a woman has got to keep growing herself and keep her pride big. Miz Phelps *was* a big woman, no mistake about that. For all her prettiness and her soft little voice and those green eyes of hers, she was a big woman. She was brave, too. Opal knew, all right.

Opal could see that behind the cheerful things she said about how wonderful it was to have the children be away, having the advantages of living in Philadelphia with those fancy friends of her husband, Miz Phelps was lonesome and heartsick. A man . . . no matter how much you loved him . . . couldn't take the place of your children, she mused. Any more than your children could take the place . . .

"*Oh, Elk!*" she cried silently, screwing up her withered eyelids in a sudden spasm of tears, "*I'll never git used to it. Never . . . Never!*" She stopped the wagon and composed herself a moment. It had been more than a year, and still these windstorms of grief twisted through her when she least expected them.

She drove up to the white doorway now and the loud grating of her wheels brought one of the Knight boys out from behind the house. Mr. Phelps kept him doing nothing except looking after the grounds of the house and the stable and the horses. Mr. Phelps spoke of him as "my stable boy." There wasn't any reason why this should amuse the townspeople as much as it did; it was the truth, wasn't it? Opal said to herself with bitter argumentative loyalty.

But suddenly she snickered inside her mind, hearing how Elk would have imitated Mr. Phelps saying those high and mighty words. Elk was fond of Stephen, but he could imitate him real good. And used to sometimes when just the two of them were alone.

The front door was opening now, and Annie Crow, the housekeeper, was running out. Annie never could learn to behave like a proper housekeeper. Too friendly with everybody. You could see Mr. Phelps didn't like it.

"You'll stay for supper," Annie was saying, helping her down from the wagon. "I got rice custard like you like, Opal." Opal frowned. She might not know everything; but she did know enough not to accept an invitation to supper from the housekeeper. However, she couldn't make poor Annie feel bad.

"I'll have to see," she said, in an embarrassed mumble. As it worked out, she didn't stay. She wasn't asked, in fact.

Inside the big central hall, Stephen was just coming down the stairs, with books in his arms. He was smoking one of those cigars he had sent out from New York, and he looked delighted to see her, as he always looked. That was one thing about him, she thought, when you're away from him you kind of forget how pleasant a man he is. You get the notion he's stuck-up and put-on, and then when you meet him, he seems so glad to see you, you just melt. No wonder people work their fingers to the bone for him.

"Why, Opal . . . this is the best thing that's happened today," he said, running down the last few steps and depositing his books on a small table, so he could take hold of her hands. "Mrs. Phelps will be so pleased . . . " He called her Opal; he called his wife, Mrs. Phelps; it was the difference between calico and silk. But you couldn't resent it, actually. One *was* calico, and the other woman *was* silk.

"I jest stopped in fer a minute," Opal said, shy as always when he came too close to her. "I been over with the ladies to see the preacher."

"I rather expected Joel would be over and see *me* before this. He's behaving rather peculiarly, isn't he?"

If he hadn't said it just that way, Opal would have asked him frankly what he thought about Mr. Adams. But now, with that suggestion of criticism, all her loyalty rose.

"No. He jest don't seem . . ." She couldn't think of a proper sentence that would say nothing, and yet would sound right. She felt as if she were going to weep, torn between her disappointment in Mr. Adams, and the necessity for protecting him from judgment.

"I'm mighty glad to hear he's come back," Stephen said. "I tried my best to keep him years ago."

"He hasn't come back," Opal blurted out. "He's only passing through, Mr. Phelps. He acted like he didn't want to have anything to do with us."

Stephen looked thoughtful, then shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps I'd better go over and talk to the man."

"That's what I hoped you'd do," Opal said, relief breaking over her face like perspiration. "It wasn't hardly my place to ask you, Mr. Phelps, you not being a church man and one thing and another. But I hoped . . ."

"Not being a church man?" he said jovially. "How can you say that, Opal? Don't you people speak of it as Mr. Phelps' Church?"

"Well, of course," she said doubtfully. "That's only on account of you giving us the bricks. And I guess we oughtn't call it that, really. Bricks don't seem to make a church, Mr. Phelps, any more than a fine house can make a home. . . ." She stopped in horror as she said that, perceiving how monstrously applicable were her words to the very floor on which she stood. But Mr. Phelps didn't seem to catch it. He was looking far away, as if he were thinking of some deep thing back in his mind.

"So the bricks didn't make the church, hmm?" he said. "I gave you people the bricks . . . maybe now you'd like me to give you the preacher himself." For some reason this amused him keenly. He rubbed his neat hands together in pleasure, and his dark eyes beamed down at her, as if between the two of them, they had thought up something really delightful. "Well, I'll see what I can do about it," he said. "I'll give it some thought, Mrs. Larsen, and I'll see what I can do."

She felt somehow out of her depth now, so she looked around uneasily at the fine furnishings of the hall, the rose-wood table and the horsehair chairs and the banjo clock with the handpainted glass showing ladies and gentlemen strolling along beside a river full of skiffs and boats.

"Mrs. Phelps will be so sorry she missed seeing you," Stephen said, gently moving with her to the door. "She's out right now on some business for the brickyard." He took her out to the drive himself, and put her into the wagon, commenting on what a fine horse she had, and urging her to come back some afternoon when she could stay and dine with them.

She hardly realized her visit was being terminated, so gallantly was it done. "And don't you worry about Joel," he said, handing the reins from the Knight boy to her. "If this town really needs him, I'll see that he stays. You know there's nothing closer to my heart than the welfare of Mount Hollow."

"I know that, Mr. Phelps," she said bewilderedly. "I guess everything you've done fer us shows that."

He went back into the house in a glow. He saw now exactly what he intended to do about Joel Adams. He'd go out there in the morning and give him five hundred dollars or so, to settle up that debt he owed the man. It irked him to have this somehow-humiliating debt hanging over from the impoverished past. He would take bills with him, stuffed in his pocket, and when he and the wanderer had come to an understanding, he would reach in his pocket and pull out a casual handful. Five hundred dollars would no doubt come in pretty handy along the trip West. He was probably badly equipped; from what Twicker said, he hadn't made anything of himself.

He would give him the money and wish him Godspeed. No use letting the caravan loiter out there at the Artor farm indefinitely. Might be a good thing to think up some nice helpful way of getting them started immediately. A send-off party, perhaps.

(3)

The house seemed very quiet these days; though the children had been gone for a long while now, Amoret never became accustomed to the quietness. A dutiful letter from them came once a month; she had nine of them in the gold jewel box on her bureau. Stilted, silly little letters they were, dictated no doubt, by Stanton Purvis' wife, or the governess. Amoret read the posturing little words over and over, until they expanded and became living pictures for her.

Thank you, dear Mama and Papa, for putting us in this suitable home. May God bless all you and yours,

the letters usually ended. But once at the bottom of the page, a quick impulsive boyish scribble said, "I love you, Mama. I cry sometimes."

Night after night she dreamed that she was on a train, or driving in a wagon over endless hot prairies, and sometimes even stumbling blindly across a mud-clogged field. She never arrived at her destination in the dream, but always she knew without words, what it was. Her children. Besides all her love for them (they were the very substance from which her own

living heart was made!) they meant something else to her; they were part of the heritage that had been given to her, the sacred heritage which Tobias wanted to leave for the future. With all her trying, she had failed that responsibility. She had given herself a new birth . . . she had brought herself painfully to very birth so that she could fulfill this pledge, and yet in an unguarded moment, she had allowed the children to be sent away where they would learn only the graces of the mind and the body, and not the graces of the spirit.

Sometimes she would wake from the dream, and lie wide-eyed and resolute beside Stephen, determined that in the morning she would tell him that she must start that very day on a journey to bring them back. But when the morning came, and he turned to her with unhappy importunateness, and the empty turbulent day began, she could not beg him. When she tried to, he took her in his arms and brushed the children aside with that annihilating argument that it was for their good.

"If I were a religious man, my dear," he said sometimes, "I'd thank God that He has given me sufficient means to send our children out of all this. Even if we *must* sacrifice ourselves while we grub along here, to educate them properly."

Stephen never admitted to himself that his house without the children was not as he had pictured it before he sent them away. It seemed to him sometimes that Amoret had even less time for him now that the children were gone. There was always something for her to do, a cheerful quiet busyness about her, although never once could he remember her saying in words that she had any duty that came ahead of her attendance upon him.

"Why, of course," she said agreeably. "Anything you want, my dear." But her time was a honeycomb, and all the cells were sealed against him, and if he wanted to know the cells it could be only by tearing down their fragile walls and destroying whatever was within.

He watched other marriages, the garrulous, earthy, simple-looking marriages all around them. But they bore small resemblance to the tumultuous dark Odyssey of his own. Thinking back over the civilized marriages he had observed in Philadelphia, he wondered if such strangling wild warfare as this could be hidden under their decorum. He knew instinctively that this amorous enmity was something rare and

terrible, rare as ecstasy, terrible as grief before dying. Most marriages he had seen were indigenous to a placid winter landscape. A white snow of indifferent habit covered the distance between most men and their women. This marriage of his existed in another climate; his was a rank wild jungle, exotic and poisonous, yet sometimes incredibly beautiful under all dangers.

He wanted despairingly to be free of it; but he knew that he never could be. Whether or not he ever crossed the ultimate threshold within this woman, he could not be free of his love for her until the rest of him was dead.

Sometimes when he watched the cool beauty of her, unaware of itself, a roaring rage surged in him, and he felt he must stride across the room and arouse and challenge that immaculate beauty to some frenzied awareness of itself, even to some resistance which might make his conquest valid. Her cool presence was but a visible picture of those glimpsed pastures of peace within her, which he knew he never could enter, the benediction of those skies beneath which he could not lie, those sheltering trees whose very names he could not say. There was a star in the midst of her, and only its remote beam fingered his eyelids; there was a grove with a temple hidden in her, and only the faint unintelligible whisper of its music plagued his ears.

Neither the star nor the temple had meaning for him, and his anger, because this was so, interpreted itself to him as a grievance against her. If he could not stroll with her in the treasures of her heart, that left him only what he could touch with his hands. This should have been all any man could want, except that he knew her honeysuckle sweetness was but the visible map of that other country which he could not reach.

Sometimes the frustration and anger in him, because she was so guilty yet so guiltless in his sight, sent him blundering from the room, his knees quivering, his hands trembling. Some days her tranquil presence set up in him a wake of uncommitted violence which horrified him. She was like a goblet so fragile that it lies in fragments in a marauding mind which sees it destroyed over and over, even while it remains untouched and intact.

The Saturday after Opal's visit had been a torturing day to him, when every unconscious gesture Amoret made had but

whetted his angry desire. In spite of his intention to go and send Joel away, he could not seem to do it. He would go tomorrow . . . today he would spend with Amoret, playing a game of indifference and calmness, watching and wanting. All the long wearying day of his held-back passion, he knew that inevitably the warfare would culminate in his greatest shame, when he would try to seize with ferocity what he did not know how to cajole into participation.

When the ultimate moment came, there was no defense offered against him, but only the silent acquiescence which was sorrow's poisoned bread in his mouth. This, then, was his bitterest humiliation; if she had resisted, he might have counted his triumph as honorable. But she never protested; her eyes were wide open and sad, and her golden hair lay in a mask across her face, where she had turned her head away from his shame. When daylight came, her wifely calmness was there to reassure him.

"Amoret . . . I don't know what to say," he stammered, putting his hands over his face.

"There's nothing to say, my poor Stephen," she murmured, and that forgiving little roughened hand of hers came over to him and tried to smooth away the wound he had inflicted on himself.

"I don't want it to be this way," he faltered. "I am only trying to have you back, the way you were . . ."

"It doesn't matter," she said in a lullaby lassitude. "You know I am your wife, Stephen . . ."

"But I don't want you to be my wife that way. I want you to love me, not just to belong to me to do what I please with . . ."

But even as he said the words, he knew they did not express what he was so brutally enunciating with that fierce demanding of his body. Words took into account none of the fury in him which wanted her to be graspable and holdable in all her entirety. Nor any of that thirst in him which never could be slaked until he drank of that secret spring in her . . .

He felt her watching him now, and he opened his eyes and peered into her face. So innocent she looked, so cloudlessly beautiful. It should not be a torment to him. Other men loved women and did not concern themselves too deeply with their little thoughts. Those thoughts of hers . . . those hidden

things in her which she fed from that book his father had left . . . what were they that he could not penetrate them? He had a trained mind . . . it was laughable to think he could not follow her into whatever by-ways of thinking she frequented. Why, that half-illiterate preacher had followed her . . . had led her, God knew . . . he had come and gone freely through those portals in Amoret which Stephen could not enter. He felt his whole body tingling with rage at the picturing of this. But he controlled that rage, for there was a conclusion waiting there for him to reach. If that stupid yokel could find her, certainly Stephen himself with all his . . .

His mind broke off suddenly, and a drenching of simple obvious reasoning poured over him. Why, certainly! It was so baldly sensible, yet he had never seen it before! If he wanted to find his way into that hidden labyrinth, he need only study the man who had the key to it. It was a vocabulary . . . a knack . . . Some men . . . he himself, for instance . . . had a kind of genius for laughter, and for making romance out of nothing. Some men had a talent for inspiring physical love. He had that, too, he admitted without joy since he had proved over and over that this love was not enough for his hunger. And there were men, no doubt, who had the knack of making people open their souls . . . (He made an inward grimace of disgust at the word, but there seemed no other he could use . . .) of opening their souls. He said it again. That was what he wanted of Amoret. Her soul. That silent being with which she walked enraptured, sometimes not seeing any outer beauty for what she saw within. That silent presence in her, which he had hated because he could not find it and embrace it . . .

Joel Adams had seen it. Tobias himself had seen it. He remembered the times he had come upon his father in his old chair and Amoret sitting on the crude little footstool before him, talking and talking.

"What do you talk about, you two?" he had asked her, laughing.

"I don't know, Stephen," she had said. "He just talks to me, and I listen . . ."

He felt as if he had been running up a long, long hill now; he was weary as if he had been running without rest for hours. But now he had reached the top of the hill, and a simple sensible idea had come to him. If you want to know about

something, you study with the men who know it. If he could watch that soft-talking yokel . . . that . . . He stopped himself from saying the impotent, abusive words that were a balm to his jealousy.

Amoret put her hand across his mouth, as if she, too, would stop that inner saying.

"What are you thinking?" she asked him.

"I've thought of something I can do to please you," he said. "I'm going out to the Artors' place this morning and ask Joel Adams to come to church with me."

(4)

Joel and Stephen went up the steps of the church together, and Stephen tried to concentrate on the masonry and the span of beams and the height of windows which he himself had insisted upon. By God! an unreligious man sometimes had more understanding of what height and width and simple beauty could do to induce that necessary quietness of brain than had the unctuous devotees themselves. He held tenaciously to the things about this church which he could see; indeed, for which he himself had been responsible. Yes, there was quite a lot of him in it; no wonder they called it Mr. Phelps' church. He should have come before; he was childish and stupid to allow his indifference to blind him to what supporting their pitiful little church could have done for him in the community—but mostly in his home.

Well, he would make up for all that now. He had no intention of making a display of conversion or anything like that; he would merely support and help the church; he would become a reliable patron. An elder brother might be a good way of saying it, if anybody questioned. But in himself he knew that his attitude was far from "brotherly." A sly lover would better express it, he thought with humorous, wry honesty.

He glanced at the face of Joel Adams, to study the reflection of the wide, elm-shadowed steps leading up to the outflung doors. But Joel's face was completely unreadable. His face was dark and his mouth, with the gash of wrinkle beside it, was firm as if it were afraid of trembling. This was probably a high and tragic moment for the poor chap, Ste-

phen thought, with a gust of involuntary affection shaking through him.

There was no sound in the building; the service must not yet have started. There were a great many more people there than you would expect. The two sections of seats on each side of the wide aisle were filled, the men on the north side and the women on the south. To Stephen's surprise, a quick summing up with his eyes along the south side of the church, showed no Amoret among the women. No, there was no low-twisted cluster of golden hair between the down-bent neck and the curve of a modish straw bonnet; only the harsh wrinkled skin of the old and the freckled, unappetizing flesh of the young women, and their somehow bitter-smelling clothes. So tuned were all his senses to that wife of his, he could tell almost without looking that she was not in this congregation.

And what on earth were they doing, those people? The circuit rider, who he understood came to them once a month or so, didn't seem to be in evidence. They were all sitting quiet, like tree-stumps in a field. Their heads were bent; their work-marked hands, some in badly-fitting gloves, were gripped in their laps. Even the children, the boys huddled obediently beside their fathers, and the little girls, upright and touching beside their mothers, were quiet.

Stephen stepped into the aisle, past the wood-burning stove. His feet made a loud clamor on the rough floor. Why, of course . . . they were praying, he realized. But it was too late now to withdraw respectfully. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Joel Adams had not followed him into the church. He was standing at the door, and the morning sun was shining down on him, outlining him in a golden haze. The impish white tufts of hair on either side of his forehead were as bright as little white flames . . .

The congregation rustled now as if a strong wind had blown across it. There was a lusty murmuring of amens, the deep gong-like rumble of Twicker, the rasp of Nat Burden's voice, a flute-note or two from the women. Then all the heads turned to see who had come into the church, and when they had seen, the neighbors half rose from their benches, and then sank down again, and a murmur spread and widened among them. Finally Jed Junham stood up, and stretched out his hand toward the door where Joel Adams still stood.

"Mr. Adams . . . Preacher, sir . . . come in, please," he said.

Handkerchiefs came out of many pockets, and those that had no handkerchiefs pawed at their eyes with their clumsy hands. But Joel stood just where he was, hardly moving, except that he put one hand up over his mouth, and lifted his face in that listening way he had.

"We've had a prayer meetin' this morning, sir," Jed Junham said. "We've been askin' God kindly would He send you back here to take charge of us again, Mr. Adams. We've had many a good preacher while you've been gone . . . but we ain't had nobody that really belonged to us. The way you do, sir. So we asked God this morning . . ."

Stephen thought angrily, "They asked God, indeed!" The same old thing, thanking God for performing some miracle or other, when what was required was a smart man to accomplish the thing. It was he, Stephen Phelps, who had brought the preacher back to them! Joel had said himself that nobody else could have done it. Out in the pasture where the prospectors were camping, he had said this morning, "Mr. Phelps . . . I couldn't stay, without you asked me to."

"If? What've I got to do with it, Joel? I asked you to stay before."

"But not . . . after what I told you, sir," Joel had said. "Not after I told you how it was with me."

"Oh, that," he said, forcing himself to touch the other man's shoulder in a comradely way. "That was a long time ago. All that's over now, Joel. The town seems to want you back here . . ."

"And you . . . and Miz Phelps . . . ?"

"Why, of course," Stephen said impatiently. "We've talked often about you, Joel."

"You have?" he said incredulously, and you could see from his expression that he never would understand how completely unimportant he was to Amoret and Stephen. It was laughable, really. Probably, while he was away, he had imagined he was some romantic and forbidden subject between them. An exciting jealousy, perhaps. When all the time, he was only . . .

"We wished you could have seen our little girl . . . and Stevie has grown into a fine big boy. We had become as fond of you as you ever were of us." Stephen said it heartily, so

that Joel would realize how uninteresting and commonplace the whole emotion was. "You come back here and live . . . I'll help you build a nice house for yourself. Mrs. Phelps will find you a good comfortable little wife . . . that's what you need, a family of your own . . . a place. You've just wandered away from the very things that belong to you."

"I did that, sir," Joel said. "That was my punishment, I reckon."

"Punishment? For what?" Stephen asked intolerantly. Good Lord! always that talk about sin and punishment! No wonder lively, high-spirited people like himself couldn't be bothered with religion.

"Why, for what I did," he said with dignity.

So now, here the congregation was, giving the credit all to God, and to their mumbling and praying. Here they were with their earthy, homely faces lighted up as if God Himself had leaned out of the sky and had moved people about like chessmen on a board, when all the time. . .

Then suddenly, his scornful thinking stopped. Suppose God did lean out and move men about to accomplish His purpose; how would He do it? Why, He would put some thought into their minds which would change their actions to fit in with His plan. They would think they had changed their own minds . . . they would have ample reason worked out to their own satisfaction, but actually. . .

How, exactly, had this very moment here in the church come about? This was a good case in point. Rapidly he rushed back over it. Last night he had five hundred dollars in his pocket to pay Joel Adams and speed him on his way. He had known precisely what he had wanted to say to Joel; yet this morning he had gone out and said something diametrically different. Diametrically opposed to his own secret intention!

Could it be God who brought such a thing about? It infuriated him even to contemplate such a possibility. Why, a man reasoned from his own motives; his actions were his own decisions made visible and effective. The motive was secret, but the action served that hidden intention obediently. A man made up his own mind, and then he did exactly what he pleased. And yet, that was certainly not what had happened this morning.

Why hadn't it happened? Something had changed his

deed. Something had persuaded him to think that a radically contrary action, such as he had just performed, could somehow better serve that deep malevolent conspiracy within himself. His motive had not changed in any way. God probably wasn't bothering to change that inner motive. God and he weren't having any dealings with each other. If God were anything at all, He was probably a gentleman; He wouldn't interfere with a man's inner motives unless He were asked to. And He certainly had never been asked by Stephen to rearrange any of his heart's purposes and emotions.

But He had been asked by the rest of these simple-minded people. If He *were* going to accomplish what they desired, He had to make use of the only man there was, who could convince Joel Adams that he ought to stay. So He had first induced Stephen Phelps to believe for a few hours that his own strategy could best be carried out by this perverse errand. Stephen had intended to serve his own selfish end; inadvertently he had become the answering of a prayer.

His mind had been running through this in a mood, half-whimsical and half-serious. It amused him to imagine how religious-minded people might conceivably analyze such a coincidence as this. It amused him, but it also infuriated him, for it was not just hypothesis. It was a most annoying fact. He had craftily laid a trap, baiting it with faultless reasons; then he had found that the trap was laid to catch himself.

He didn't want Adams in town; he saw that now. Yet, it had been he who brought him back. *He*, not God! They might praise God; he could only curse himself.

Nat Burden had got up from his seat now, and sniffing and gulping, had gone back to the door to grip Joel's hand. Lem James, running along like a rabbit, had scuttled to join him. "Mr. Adams, sir . . ." Nat Burden was saying huskily, "I wanted to tell you sometime, what you done fer me that night when you laid me flat on the ground. That made a man outen me, sir. I been a different man from that night. And the neighbors will tell you the same thing, sir."

Lem James said, "And me, too, Preacher." His toothless mouth was a round grimace of emotion. "We got to have you back here, sir, helpin' us the way you know how to."

Joel wasn't saying anything. He looked carefully into the men's faces and swept his eyes over the twisted-about figures in the congregation, some risen from their seats, others bent

over with their faces hidden. Then he came down the aisle. He walked with decision to the very front of the church, and stepped up into the pulpit. He took hold of his lapels with his big tanned fists, the way he always used to stand when he talked. So often had they pictured him there, that no one found it strange. The church looked finished now at last; that was all.

"I want to tell you about the prodigal son this morning," he said, as simply as if he had been but briefly interrupted. "I've had that boy right here inside my heart all these years, and I know him well. He's been eatin' husks all these years, starvin' himself. And all the time there was a home waitin' for him . . . and people he loved . . ."

(5)

Late the next week Joel made his formal call upon Mrs. Phelps, as was certainly proper when you considered all that Mr. Phelps had done in getting him established in town, arranging a suitable parsonage and even an elderly housekeeper to "do" for him. (Mr. Adams would much have preferred taking care of himself, some said.)

He came into the Phelps house a stranger, a shy scowling stranger. That may have been because the house was such an overpowering stranger to him. Even the trees outside the parlor windows, which you could just glimpse through the Nottingham lace curtains, didn't look familiar to him. Mrs. Phelps herself, in a gray poplin afternoon dress, bordered with twenty or thirty yards of deep violet braid, was a stranger.

He realized before he had been in the parlor fifteen minutes that all his shyness and hanging-back had been unnecessary suffering. This woman, so fashionable and self-possessed, bore no resemblance at all to that bright, reaching girl who had unsettled his life so fatally. In this cool pleasant woman, there was very little to remind him of the troubling companion he had carried secretly in his heart for nearly ten years. What Mr. Twicker had said about the town applied more poignantly to the woman herself; everywhere you looked there was the mark of Stephen Phelps. You could see his compliments in her assurance, his material success in her

suave acceptance of the almost ridiculous luxury and gentility they had managed to reproduce in this large house of theirs, his restless, impatient mind in her well-informed words about the slavery problem and the growth of the West.

But there was one more mark of Stephen Phelps which smote Joel Adams with quaking despair. For most conspicuous of all, you could see his blatant masculine domination in the happy heartlessness with which this woman, who once had been an ardent mother, was now sitting, serenely irresponsible, in this childless house.

Stephen had come up the slope from the mill to have tea with them. Tea was a reassuring ceremony. It left no nonsense in your mind that there ever was going to be any danger lying dormant in this group. No wonder Stephen could afford to be generous and kind to him! Joel saw now that it was boyish and absurd that he ever should have felt any close and tragic connection with these two fortunate persons. He was as unimportant to them as if he had been but a cobbler who long ago had passed their farm and had stopped to mend their boots. They had discarded the boots years past . . . and the memory of him with the rubbish.

Why, their old association was as remote from this present scene as was his pet bluejay. Wild things flew across a man's sky . . . an over-mastering love, or a morning with music raining down out of sunshine . . . or a bird, whose little brain was split by the recognizing of a human, so that he never again was a free creature of the wilderness, but only a wistful watcher incongruously following a man, with a dog's love in a bird's body . . . These things happened in the heart, and only a fool moved the furniture of a life to make a place for them. These things happened in the heart, and they were either large or little as you chose to make them. Only a fool let the small inner events loom into a great shadow of outer happening, as he had done.

He felt a plunge of freedom all through him like a chilled blast of wind. But it was too late for him to welcome this freedom; he had given too many of his years to being enslaved by what he now saw was only a myth. He felt like one who had long guarded a diamond, too precious even for him to look at. Now across years of yearning and denial, he had been brought to the point where he must look carefully at the jewel he had been cherishing. And behold, when the case in

which he had guarded it was forced open before his eyes, he had to admit that what had lain within was not a jewel but only a fragment of ice. It had been but a trick of his own eyes. Where his treasure once had lain in the dark, was now not a trace. You could not say "the light has gone out of it." More final than that! If you said anything at all you must say, "it has gone out of the light." It had melted so far out of consciousness that there was not even a mark where the love had lain.

All this he was thinking while he was sitting in their parlor, his high knees gripped together, to hold a plate on which rested a cup of tea that chattered constantly, because something in him was trembling. He kept picking up the cup in his big hands, to keep the others in the room from noticing the chattering, but then he could not eat the delicate slice of cake on the plate. Stephen was talking politics in a witty, companionable way that was somehow both flattering and patronizing. Amoret was sitting beside the tea table, her right hand dangling listlessly from the arm of her chair, her eyes faraway and brilliant between their bronze lashes. An amethyst surrounded by diamonds looked too heavy for her hand, as if the weight of its meaning was what had made the hand listless and idle. There was a melody to the sight, if one can imagine such a thing, about her sitting in that chair, all in a minor key.

When he had finished what he wanted to say, Stephen leaped up with that boastful energy which always animated his most trivial motion, and set his cup and plate down on the tea table. He bent over and touched Amoret's cheek with one possessive finger. He did not kiss her, not with a stranger in the room. But he smiled significantly into her eyes, and then, still bent in his graceful attitude, he looked over at Joel, and smiled again. Joel knew that he had been a present to Mrs. Phelps; he had been "given" to her in the magnanimous way that Stephen had "given" so many other things . . . by the whimsical grace of his generosity. The fact that her husband had "given" her the preacher was a declaration of Joel's harmlessness.

"You'll excuse me now, please," Stephen was saying. "You and Mrs. Phelps talk over your plans for the church. I know I don't have to tell you you can count on me for anything you need, Joel. I want Mount Hollow to have the finest church in

the county." His tone would have been the same if he had substituted the word "inn" or "school" or any other public appurtenance.

Joel acknowledged his kindness with a word, but inside himself was spreading a wave of disappointment about Stephen. "He is farther from religion at this moment, than when he used to be fighting God," he said to himself. "Then he was honest. Now he has found his old pattern of superiority. He wants to help God now! The old trick to make himself bigger than what he 'helps.'"

Stephen went out of the room, and they heard him speaking to Annie Crow in his pleasant, master-of-the-house voice. Amoret and Joel sat in silence, not looking into each other's faces. They were strangers utterly. Joel thought abjectly, "I cannot do all this. It would mean nothing to the town in the long run. It would only fatten their complacency, thinking they had a good enviable church. They'd be better off hungry than feeding from hypocrisy . . ."

Amoret said, not moving at all, "Mr. Adams, would you like to walk over to your old house? We've kept your things safe for you. You'll want them again, won't you?"

"There can't be much there that's valuable. Only a few books and some homemade furniture."

"It's all valuable," she said in a quiet little voice, still not looking at him. "You would not be the man you are now, if you had not made that little house full of furniture."

He wanted to say to her, in bitterness and grief, "What man *am* I now, Amoret? A lost man, having no heart in me. Having nothing in me now out of which I could build a house full of furniture . . . nor tame a wild bird . . . nor care whether Columbus was seeking riches or the answer to Isaiah's prophecy . . ."

He got up from his chair in a fumbling blind way, and she took his rattling teacup from his hand. Accidentally then their eyes met, and he saw in hers such joy and excitement that he could not help a leaping of flame within him.

"Stephen has told you . . . and everyone has told you . . . what it means to have you back," she said in a rush. "But I haven't mentioned it, Mr. Adams. I don't know how to tell you."

They went out the front door, and Amoret showed him the lilac tree and a honeysuckle he himself had given her. They

walked over the rounded top of the hill, healed now forever of any scar of the old cabin. But the proscenium of the sky was there just as it had been that morning she moved the harp out to play to God. Suddenly with an agonizing thawing all along him, he remembered how she looked, shaking the music from her fingers like golden butterflies that circled round her lifted head and soared toward heaven.

"This is but the second stanza of that song," he cried within himself. "The hill is wearing a mansion now, and she is wearing a gown and an amethyst with diamonds . . . but under it all there still survives what belonged to me then . . . what belonged to me because I saw it and heard it and loved it for my own."

She said, as if she had read the mad exultation in his mind, "I think of it many times, when I walk across this hill. It's been ten years since you went away . . . I don't know how you've spent your life, Mr. Adams, but as for me . . . well, there's never been a day when I've not seen something you started in me, keeping me going."

"Do you mean that, ma'am?"

She nodded. "I suppose many of the people in this town could say that to you, Mr. Adams." She added that shyly, for she didn't want him to think she was claiming anything special, to which she had no right.

"Ma'am, I'd give you the raw heart out of my body, if it was anything you wanted," he said. The words had come out of him without any warning. So earnest were they, so stamped with the deepest insignia of himself that he did not even consider how they must sound to her. He did not even glance into her face to see how she had received them. They strode along in step for a few more paces; her modish poplin gown swelled out behind her, tugging at her limbs in a protesting way, for it was not a gown made for walking across a hilltop; it was a gown for mincing across carpets . . .

"Do you know why I went away?" he asked after a silence. When she didn't answer, he said with as much gentleness as if he were talking to a child, "I went away, ma'am, because I had fallen in love with you. A man ought to watch his feelings. Especially a man who sets himself up to be a preacher. But I hadn't watched mine. So that meant I had no right to be a preacher any more."

Still she said nothing. She only walked a little faster, as if

to lay a larger distance between that incongruous mansion and this fast-sweeping moment which was rushing to meet them.

"I had deceived myself about it," he said. "I let myself stay on, seeing you every day, sitting at your dinner table, helping your husband, ma'am . . . and all the time letting myself believe it was all the Phelps I was growing fond of."

A bird, perhaps the wild great-great-grandchild of his old tamed bluejay, swooped in a blue arc before them, squawking a guttural ribaldry.

"But it was only you, ma'am, I loved. So I had to go away quickly."

"They needed you here," Amoret said.

"That was my second sin. It took me three years to realize that. But then it was too late. You see, I put my troubles and my grief ahead of my duty. I left my work standing idle, while I ran away."

He saw his cabin now among the trees on the lesser knoll. His eyes were needled with light for an instant because of what that little house had once meant to him. But with all its meaning, it was less real than the words he was saying now.

"So then . . . the way a man does who cannot bear his guiltiness . . . I blamed the whole thing on God."

She shook her head, unable to believe such passionate warfare could have happened in a man so gentle.

"I quarreled with Him a long time. And finally we parted company. 'Get out of my affairs. You had Your chance and You made a fool of me,' I said. So then I got myself into as much mischief as I could. Every kind, except woman-mischief. But that wasn't because I wouldn't have done it! I just couldn't seem to want to, ma'am. I tried, sometimes, I thought maybe that would be a way to say the same thing to *you* that I had said to God. I put myself in the way of woman-mischief, if you can understand me," he said with flushing simplicity. "But a man can't eat if he isn't hungry. I tried sometimes, but . . . well, something just stopped me."

"What stopped you?" she asked with whispered fierceness.

"Your face, Amoret. Your face on the inside of my eyeballs. Standing in the Junham field, holding your baby with both arms while you explained to the neighbors about those riches you wanted for your family . . . or maybe your eyes tipped up trusting, to ask me what some verse meant in the readin'

. . . or that day when you showed me the coon's print . . . forgive me, ma'am, for remembering you that way, and loving you even when you carried another man's child in your body. . . ."

In a few minutes he went on again, in a different voice:

"So after a while, I made up my mind that I wouldn't stay away any longer. If I didn't have any work to do for God, well, I'd work just for myself. I'd work for the same things other men work for . . . money and my own woman. I made up my mind I'd go out and look for a fortune . . . I'd get it any way I could. Not just a little money like a man can earn by hard work . . . but gold . . . crazy barrells of gold, the way they talk about it, out there in California."

She was shaking her head now, wide-eyed with horror. But she could not stop him from telling her about it.

"Then when I had enough, I would come back here . . . not looking the way I look now . . . maybe I'd ride back in some fine carriage . . . And if you had gone away from here, why, I'd just go wherever you were . . ."

His dark face was twisted with the humor and the pathos of his own extravagant absurdity. The two white quills of hair, alert and vigorous, gave his face a debonair expression that was both touching and audacious.

"Oh, Joel," she cried, half-laughing, half-provoked with him. "How could you be so blind?"

He was half-laughing now himself, in a rueful sober way. "Yes. I was blind, and I was a fool. And sometimes a man has got to be both. If he's too proud and too stubborn . . . well, God must think up a reason . . . a fool's reason, if that's the only kind he can accept, in order to get his feet back on the path that takes him home."

She was weeping now, but she scarcely seemed to know it. The tears were only glitters of light in her eyes.

"And all the time you *had* the only thing I ever could want! Not a fortune, not a house . . . nothing that can be bought . . ."

"What was that I had, ma'am?" he asked it without breath, as if the answer might change the whole course of their lives. But she did not guess what might have been answered, for out of the simplicity of her earnestness she said, "You had peace of heart because you knew God."

He waited while the man's moment of mad hope modu-

lated to the preacher's calmness, then he said, "Yes, I had that. But you have peace of heart, too . . . You have everything you want . . ."

"No . . . I've lost everything I want. It's too late for me now . . ."

"Too late?"

"I've lost my children," she said. She turned her face away in unspeakable sorrow. Overlaying the sorrow was shame because besides her woman's failure, there was the defeat of her highest purpose.

A flood of gladness poured through him. This *was* Amoret; she had not changed. The gown and the amethyst . . . the quick bright words she said to please her husband . . . they were only shadows flickering across her. When she could rise to her feet again and move in her own direction, those shadows would fall behind her, leaving no mark.

She swayed toward him as if blown by a wind of wanting. "I've lost myself, because I've lost my children," she said in a whisper. "I don't even know how to ask for your help. But you'll have to help me, Joel."

For a moment he thought, "I have been a broken reed . . . how could I help her?" But as he said the words, he saw they were spoken in the past tense in his mind, and a new thrust of courage and sureness was in him now.

She said in a faltering whisper, "You used to have such strength in you . . . you had it in everything you ever said to me . . ."

"I have it again," he said, lifting his head in a proud quick way. "It's there now, for both of us. You've given it back to me, ma'am."

Their eyes met a long moment; they knew that each had given back to the other something which had seemed lost.

The hand of each, outstretched to help the other, had steadied itself . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Knowing Joel Adams was in town made you different; made you see things different, made you act different. It was hard to explain how a man could take a little piece of your nature away with him when he went, and bring it back when he returned. "Feels like part of myself has come home to me now that he's back," Mrs. Junham said. He had a way of looking at you as if he knew you were a finer, bigger person than you suspected, and that made you look at yourself twice to see if there was something in you you had overlooked.

Mr. Phelps gave you mighty nice houses to live in, no mistake about that. But the preacher made you see that only a certain quality of person could live good in a fine house. Or in any other kind of house, for that matter. Mr. Phelps shamed you into keeping your house looking stylisher and neater than the neighbors' houses. But there was no setting-down place in that kind of ambition. Soon as you got your parlor fixed up fancy, you had to begin on your dining room. Soon's the town got the square in the middle of Mount Hollow planted with grass and a few bushes for nothing but prettiness' sake, Mr. Phelps wanted them to plant a row of elm trees right down Main Street, for the same vague reason. But Mr. Adams made you realize that a town is only about as big as the people who live in it, and only about as purty as the inside of those people. No use making your house comfortable and warm, if the inside of you was dried-up and mean and cold.

Maybe the two ways of improving a town ought to go together. Maybe that was where Mount Hollow was terrible lucky. One man without the other would have made the town grow uneven, some people thought. It was probably God's will to have the two of them working together, one to clean the outside of the platter, and the other to make beautiful the inside, as the Book suggested. Anyway, between them, Mount Hollow ought to amount to something!

With everything else he knew about the high things a man needed, Mr. Adams also understood about wanting gold.

Land sakes! he had been on his way to get gold when something stopped him and gave him back to them. He never scolded at them because they wanted to get ahead in a material way, as some preachers do. He said the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and if a man recognizes that, he can enjoy that fullness the way God intended him to. Every four or five months he preached a sermon from the text, "Little children, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." He always told them that that meant first the kingdom within and then snug houses and rich orchards and wide cornlands without. Preacher never thought there had to be any quarrel between the goodness within and the goodness without, so long as you made sure which one came first in importance. Even gold was all right, he said, so long as you knew what gold it was you really wanted.

"I've found more gold right here than I ever would have found in California," he said to them sometimes when they asked him was he satisfied about the way things had turned out for him.

"Gold? What gold is that, Mr. Adams?" they asked, thinking about the thirty-five dollars a month they were able to pay him for being their regular preacher, compared to the wagonloads of gold people were said to be bringing back from the West.

"Why, you people!" he said, turning that broad shy smile upon them. "You people, and mornings in my vegetable garden, listening to what God has got to say in a good-growing garden."

He didn't always do his listening in his own garden, either; often he did it . . . and his digging . . . in theirs. He resumed his work where he had left it ten years before, for he became again the all-round handy man in the town, the willing friend, who knew how to do anything, from birthing a troublesome calf, to drawing up a will at the last minute.

"Preacher ain't got what you'd call a settin-still religion," is how they explained his function to each other. "Some men of God like to explain things settin' in the parlor, or better still in the dining room afore a big plate of chicken."

After all, if it was worth anything at all, religion ought to be something that would keep you going. Goodness ought to be a going concern. God didn't sit around idle. God kept everything growing and changing, bud into blossom and blossom into fruit . . . They hadn't quite expected the preacher

to be this way; they thought that now that he had a good brick church to preach in, he'd see that the town's religion would kind of get organized into one place. You would have to be of the elect and be dressed up in your best tight-fitting boots and walk up the steps of the church, and when everybody who was good enough was inside, the doors would be shut and the preacher would give out. That's how they thought it would be, same way as it was with most of the "men of God" that had come their way. But preacher's religion didn't stay shut into any church . . . nor into any special hour. It was something which got around town everywhere, just the way the free sunlight and the rain did.

"And why not?" Joel said, when they asked him about this, thinking maybe there was a danger religion would be *too* free. "There isn't anybody in the world as gregarious as God is. There isn't a place He doesn't visit. There isn't a man, woman or child that He doesn't talk to, whether they listen to Him or not." He looked around at them with a twinkle in his eye, and this twinkle together with the white little horns in his black hair, made you know you were listening to a man who knew both worlds, God's and men's.

"Sometimes people are snobbish about God," Joel said, "but God is never snobbish about people."

No, with all the growing the town had done while Mr. Adams was away, seemed like it never got really big until he came back. They said it so freely that finally Stephen himself, busy with all his enterprises, heard it. He treated it as a joke at first. "Well, I hear Mount Hollow's going to be on the map now that the preacher has honored us," he said to Mr. Twicker. But Mr. Twicker, deaf to the sarcasm, only agreed. "Sure does seem that way," he said without any malice.

"I guess the banker and the storekeeper and the builder and God knows what all, don't count for much compared to the preacher."

"We all done our part, I s'pose," Mr. Twicker said placidly.

But finally it went beyond amusement with Stephen, and became a definite irritation to him. After all, he had done the early suffering and sweating to build this town into something more than a mudhole with a rim of shacks around it. What was it that big scarecrow of a lawyer back in Springfield had said to him long ago about the breaking of the land?

"Nobody can know how much hardship and tiredness has to go into the first few years of a farm, except the man who

has lived through it." Well, it was the same way with a town.

He had dreamed of building something decent and fair out here in the wilderness. He had despaired of ever bringing these people any gentility or culture, but he had wrung his brains and twisted his wits to devise a way of giving them building materials and showing how they could be used with a measure of grace. He had made certain that the public highway should make a double-jointed bend in order to come through the town. That achievement of his had required the legislators to look the other way when the road plan was approved but Stephen, for the sake of his Mill . . . and the town, of course . . . had managed it. And at this very moment he was dickering to have a branch of the railroad brought through! That would put the town on the map; if the railroad came, it would tempt every sort of industry dependent on freight to settle in Mount Hollow. The workmen would need new houses . . . and the railroad would need ties and timbers for the bridges and trestles.

Now this Adams had come back with his easy talk, just simple enough to be digestible by their simple minds. And they seemed to consider he had performed some miracle for them.

(2)

Stephen never could set for himself the precise day when the estrangement began, but he knew that Joel Adams' return was directly responsible for it. And he, himself, had been responsible for that return! It drove him into bitter and impotent rage to think about it. He could not say exactly when the door closed against him, any more than you can be certain at what hour winter comes. He could not even be sure, at first, that Amoret herself knew how firm was the closing.

There was a wholeness about her which he could only describe to himself as the harvest season. She seemed at the same time younger and more mature, carefree yet grave, as if no outside thing mattered, while she was attentive only to some quiet dialogue within. She seemed smoothed and soothed as if the agony of growing and the suspense of maturing had paused, while she sat empty-handed in the mellow afternoon and surveyed an unseen plenitude.

Sometimes he felt he must tear aside her serenity and

shout an accusation at her. Not of physical infidelity; but of some infatuation so subtle and pervading that nothing else could touch her rim. But his pride would not allow him to phrase the thing, and his caution warned him that if Joel's name were so much as whispered, it might wake her to full knowing.

Plainly she had come to some understanding with herself, which did not include him in any way. He tried to break into this calmed interlude, first with gentleness, then with mounting violence, but nothing brought him close. When he spoke, it was almost as if he were using a voice she could only dimly hear, so that she must force herself to listen with gentle courtesy. As weeks went on, he realized that more and more doors in her were shutting against him.

Whenever he tried to talk about the children, seizing upon them as the final bond, only then did she turn away, her whole body withdrawn and tightened against him. The absence of the children, more formidable than any presence, towered between them. Sometimes he railed against her, "You got the children ready yourself. You made Harriet's little clothes. You packed their trunks."

"I didn't understand why you were doing it," she said.

"There's no mystery about why I was doing it," he cried angrily. "I sent them back where they could be reared like Phelpsese, and not like Knights or Adamses, or any other of the mongrel breed whom you call your friends."

"No," she said. "That wasn't the reason, Stephen. That was only the shell around the reason."

Often he asked in exasperation, "What do you want me to do now?"

"Send for them to come back. I want my children, Stephen. . . . I cannot bear this."

But he was not yet ready to have them back. He could bear no one in this house just then, not even the children. For a shame, bigger than any he yet had borne, had come into his house, and he had had to dismiss Annie Crow, because he could not endure the thought of even a servant knowing about it. He lived in daily horror that perhaps he had not got Annie Crow out of the house before she discovered it . . . Whenever he talked to one of the townsmen, he watched his face for any sign of heartless ridicule or malicious glee. But he could never be quite certain whether or not anyone knew what had happened in his house. These clam-lipped suckers

were perfectly capable of giving no evidence that they were discussing his most intimate business among themselves, just as they had given no sign long ago that they were chewing over his financial affairs during the months before they burned down his house. He tortured himself imagining he saw a gleam in some man's eyes which meant that he knew. But he was too proud to ask Amoret if Annie Crow had suspected.

The day it happened he had been away on some bank business, and when he came back he found that Amoret had moved all her possessions from their big front chamber across the gallery to a small plain room in the wing of the house, which they did not use. He strode into the room, his face white as paper. She spoke to him without turning from the clothes closet where she was hanging her rustling fragrant gowns.

"What . . . what on earth are you doing?" he said.

"I wish to sleep in this room, Stephen." She stooped to pick up a purple delaine frock which had slipped to the floor.

"You mean . . . you've moved out of my bedroom?"

"Yes, I have," she said. Then she did turn, and there was nothing in her eyes but pity and fearlessness. "I don't want to be your wife any longer, Stephen."

His face flamed then. "Why . . . I never heard such poppycock . . . I" he said, but he could go no further. "You're ill, Amoret?" he said in a few minutes, begging her to pretend that was it, whether it was true or not.

"Of course I'm not ill," she said steadily. "I'm well . . . I'm well for the first time in many months, Stephen."

"Then what?"

"I told you. I do not wish to be married to you any longer. I do not wish to run the risk of bearing you another child."

Instinctively he turned and closed the door of the small bedroom, and she remembered that day long ago on the Ohio River boat, when she had first spoken to him of a child. In exactly the same cautious way he had glanced around to make sure no one could overhear her unwomanliness. That strange male modesty had seemed somehow endearing to her then, she remembered, but now there was only repugnant secretiveness and smallness about his caring whether anyone overheard or not.

"I shall have no more children for you to turn into snobs,"

she said. "I had something to give my children, and you would not let them accept it . . ." The twin of this moment flashed before her memory again, and she wrinkled her forehead, trying to recall it precisely. Yes, that was it. In that very moment on the boat when she had first fallen in love with America and with the heritage Tobias had wanted her to carry safely down to the future, had lain the bitter seed of all this. Even then Stephen had said, "Of course you shall have a child, my darling, as soon as we have suitable servants to care for it."

"I won't need any servant to care for my child. I have something to give it . . . better than any servant's care, better than . . ." She remembered how incoherent she had been, how unsure even in herself of what she was trying to say. He had forgotten his ignominious caution then and had taken her in his arms and had kissed her ardently. "Have you, my pet?" he had said indulgently, with no faint idea of what she could give a child.

She said to herself now, "He took them away from me before they were even conceived."

He was pacing up and down the tiny room, kicking furiously at a humble little rocking chair in his way. "I think you're out of your mind," he said. "Suppose someone finds out? You'll make me the laughingstock of this town. First, you babble nonsense, so that they burn down my house. Then . . . you've caused me nothing but trouble and shame, Amoret . . . all the love you used to have . . . all the womanliness . . . what's become of it?"

He banged out of the room, and she knew with momentary softness in her, that if he had stayed he would have fallen before her and humiliated himself unforgivably by begging. But even if he had begged, she could not have come back to him. Even if she had wanted to, she could not have unlocked something in herself which had closed like a valve against him.

(3)

Through that winter he was feverish with business plans. He turned his money over and over in deal after deal. There were strange men driving up to the mansion day and night,

each with some proposal or transaction. They arrived tight-faced and eager; they were closeted with Stephen for an hour or so in his study, and finally they emerged, hearty and beaming. They always shook hands jovially at the door, and if it was a specially profitable deal, Stephen walked out to the carriage yard with them. When he came into the house, he was usually expansive and jolly, obviously pleased with whatever he had accomplished.

"But all this is too slow," he kept saying over and over. "I want to make a fortune, not a few dribbles. I want to do big things, Amoret."

"Big things," she commented thoughtfully. "What's big to you, Stephen?" He never answered these remarks; he never appeared to hear them. Sometimes, however, he struck out defensively, half in boasting, half in self-pity.

"I've had nobody to help me . . . no understanding, encouraging wife . . ."

"No," she said, "no wife at all, Stephen. Nor any children. Nothing but the wonderful business, and the best house in central Illinois. Empty. But still the best." Her face as she said such things remained as gentle and soft as it always had been, so that his eyes never could believe what his ears were hearing.

"Amoret, don't torture me," he cried sometimes, speaking to her face. "If something has made you stop loving me . . ."

"Not something," she said. "Somebody, Stephen. You. Nobody but you."

It was a terrible winter for both of them. And one thing that made it more terrible, more unbelievable for him, was that sometimes this woman who slept the wide entrance hall away from him, would lay aside that hateful feud between them, and talk to him as if she were another man. She would be friendly and cheerful then, asking intelligent questions that often cast a beam of light into some unexplored angle of a proposition he was considering. She often worked side by side with him in his mill office, but less and less frequently he came over the hill to the modest little building which housed the office of the brickyard. More and more that was her business, and that of the unwelcome Knights; and he allowed it to be so. She would bend with him over the ledgers in the mill office; she herself wrote many of the letters to the brokers who sold his Phelps Flours.

"I ought to have a new signboard painted . . . a new stencil for the meal bags," he said once. "Phelps and Phelps."

She smiled with pleasure at this. "I do enjoy it," she said. "As long as I have nothing else to do."

But whatever small satisfaction there might have been in that moment of companionship was spoiled for him, because his eye, lighting on the trademark, Phelps Flours, traveled down to include the two roses, and for the first time in many years he remembered what those little roses had once meant.

They worked side by side like two men who respected each other, but if he remembered for an instant that she was not another man, she stiffened, and her eye was splintered with darting light, like an angry pony's eye. The whole year was whipped to a quick tempo for both of them, because of words they did not speak.

The world had become a rimless possibility of wealth, denied to nobody who had the daring to leave what was behind and fare forth into the promise. There was excitement in the air for everyone who listened to the brass music of the circus parade of gold seekers who passed through Mount Hollow. Many of those from farther East hurried to El Dorado by sea, and it was said that in the spring of 1850 more than two hundred and fifty ships left Eastern ports for California. Forty-five of them arrived at San Francisco on one day. Prospectors from the Middle West had eight routes to choose from. The trains of wagons met and joined much farther west than Mount Hollow, but every day after the back of the winter was broken there were straggling small parties passing. At Saint Joseph the groups combined for safety in crossing the long wastelands; they said one train had nearly three thousand wagons in it when it started across the Mormon Trail.

Small valiant groups passed here, their spirits high and their hopes outrageous. They had pooled their funds and their interests before leaving home; in some cases they were proud to show Stephen legal documents and guarantees which they had drawn up for joint stock companies. There was always a captain who made the major decisions, and set the pace.

Being the captain often wasn't an easy task, one leader confided. "Americans is too interested in doing what they please. Everybody knows best," he said.

There were both large companies and small that streamed

through town. Every once in a while one wagon alone, with a milch cow tied behind, would plod past. Once there was even a lone immigrant trundling a wheelbarrow, piled and supplies and a pick and shovel. He was an optimistic Irishman who had walked from Canada. "And ivery town I pass, some bugger offers me a job," he said. "And me after leavin' me job behind me!"

Long before spring came, there was talk about a company setting out from Mount Hollow. The Junham twins had sent home two thousand dollars with a letter which said: "Plenty more where this come from, Pa." The James boy wrote to say he hadn't had as good luck as some, but even so he guessed he'd be worth his weight in gold before he stopped digging.

Phelps, Twicker and Dane had to decide upon a policy of loans to finance prospectors. While they were deciding as a firm, Stephen as an individual staked two or three youngsters, with no other security than a percentage of what they might bring back.

Early in April a small party did finally get organized in Mount Hollow. Seeing the parade go by, day after day, was just more than flesh and greed could stand. On Stephen's advice, they had heavy sturdy wagons built. (It was characteristic of him that the wagons must be extra sturdy; ironically enough this heaviness was largely responsible for the caravan's never surviving the journey.) The men who signed up protected their future prosperity by every legal caution; they made bargains and promises to the neighbors who were staying at home, to have their families cared for. The whole town was wracked with their going.

The last week was filled with tension and toasting and tears. They were leaving at dawn on Thursday, so Tuesday night the whole town celebrated with a brass band and lanterns, and liquor for all. There was no parlor large enough to hold the going-away party. Mr. Twicker wouldn't lend them his warehouse, and the church didn't seem the suitable place. So Stephen offered to clear out the lower room of the mill, which had been replaced after the accident by a big brick structure. The committee decorated the loading platform (although on the evening of the party it was too cold outside for comfortable dancing).

When the festivity was at its height, Bud Artor, who was one of the principal organizers of the company, slipped off

the platform and broke his leg. After that excitement had subsided, a group of the prospectors drew themselves into a conclave and finally stopped the brass band to make an announcement.

"Us prospectors jest took a ballot, folks," Arthur Slater said, "and we want to ask Mr. Phelps if he'll take Bud's place and come along with us. Fact is, I'll resign as the leader, and I'll take Bud's place, and Mr. Phelps kin take mine. If he'll join up with us."

A cheer went up from the other prospectors to show they were reinforcing this announcement. Everyone looked at Stephen expectantly.

"Much as I appreciate the honor," he said, stumbling over his words because of real emotion, "I'm afraid the whole thing is out of the question."

"What's out of the question about it, sir?" somebody called out. The mill was in an uproar for a few minutes, and finally Stephen said, "My wife is my first consideration, of course. I couldn't decide a thing like this without Mrs. Phelps saying what she wants." His eye was running around the walls, seeking Amoret's face, but when he found it, he could read nothing in it. She made no move at all, either of assent or protest. He thought with wild despair, "She is completely indifferent about it . . . they'll see that . . . now they'll know!" Then, exactly as if he had received from her some sign so secret that they could not detect it, he cried, "Very well then, if you don't mind, my dear," and turning back to Slater, he said, "If you'll hold up the starting one more day . . ."

From his chair which had been brought down from Stephen's office, Bud Artor, still a little limp from pain, called out, "If you'll hold up the starting two more days, I'll be up on my own feet, good as any of you."

Before the night was put to bed, it had been settled. Indeed, after it was over, Stephen felt that it had been decided long ago, in the back of his own mind. The fact was, he could have left on Thursday as they had planned, for he had been tantalizing himself for days with the notion of breaking away from this hateful situation at home and joining them. He had all his affairs in scrupulous order, in case he should decide to go.

After the last wagon had driven away, he and Amoret walked up to their house in silence. He wanted her to speak

first so he could know the key of her thinking about all this. He could have adjusted himself to anything . . . and suddenly it swept over him with helpless dismay that their positions had somehow become reversed through the years. Once it had been she who had waited with nimble agility to fit into his mood, as liquid assumes the shape of the vessel which holds it. Something inexplicable had happened between them. She, the weaker and the softer, the less trained and less educated, had become the stronger in influence. She had become the decisive force in every subtle fact. Outwardly it still appeared that he shaped the form of their events and their marriage, but actually . . .

"Amoret, I've been thinking about going for a long time," he said. "I don't want you to believe those yokels made up my mind for me."

"I know. I can understand your going, Stephen."

He felt so relieved by this that he wanted to tell her everything he could think of. "Amoret," he said, "I want to make a new beginning. I want to go back to where we were when we came out here. In every way." She walked along in the darkness, saying nothing.

"I'm going to give up a year of my life with you and go out there and get us that wealth."

"Will that do it?" she asked. "Will that take us back to where we were?"

"Of course it will do it," he said emphatically. "These thirteen years of grubbing and suffering and torturing ourselves with work have nearly ruined both of us. But it's not too late to have ourselves again as we were." His voice was spangled with earnestness and pleading. "The time has come now, and I'll make a real fortune. I can do it. I know I can do it. I'll be back in a year, Amoret, and we'll sell everything here and forget all this. We'll go back to Philadelphia where civilized people live. We'll have our children with us. But most of all we'll have each other."

"You've made yourself rich, Stephen," she said musingly, "and still you seem to have nothing."

"Not rich enough," he said impatiently. "I want enough money so I can have you again, Amoret. The way I had you first . . . beautiful and delicate and lovely . . . and loving me the way you did. Nothing means anything to me unless I

have you the way I used to have you." He was trembling now, as they walked along, and his voice betrayed the trembling. They were passing the very spot where, that first night they had lived on this hill, he had picked her up in his arms and had waltzed round and round.

At the top of the hill, the new cabin had stood, with light and fiddle music filtering out of it. From where they had danced, the cabin seemed no bigger than a lighted lantern dropped among the trees. Satin chips from the logs, white as patches of snow in the moonlight, had glistened on the ground. Stephen, twisted with shame and suffering that night, could not have foreseen that this night could lie ahead of him, with all its striving and success. Yet he was still saying the same thing he had talked about then, making enough money somehow so that they could get away from here. And all the time what he was looking for, what he was wanting, was here . . . here on this hill, here, walking beside him. If only he knew how to stretch out his hand and touch it.

"Amoret," he said, "I sent the children away so that I could have you to myself."

"I know that. You tried to make yourself rich in that, too, Stephen. And in that, also, you have nothing."

Still he didn't realize that she was paraphrasing that wide wisdom which Tobias had written in the codicil of his will, and which Stephen's own life had so perfectly illustrated. He knew where the verse was . . . he had told her, sardonically, when she could not remember, that it was in Proverbs 13. He had seen it with his own eyes; yet his mind had never seen it. He had ignored the verse, seizing Tobias' banknote which the old man had entrusted to the verse.

"I'll have it all again," he was saying determinedly. "I'll have you and the fortune. We'll be happy, the way we used to be . . ." He stopped now and turned to face her. He looked down at her with a gentleness which she remembered with swift pain had been reserved only for little Harriet. He put out his hands and gripped her shoulders.

"Armoret . . . I want to tell you something. A man and woman don't often love the way we have loved. There was something different about us. It means something when it happens."

"What does it mean, Stephen?" she whispered eagerly, and

her heart paused in its beating, with the hope that he might say something which would unlock that sealed room within her. "Tell me, Stephen. What does it mean?"

"It means there is some quality . . . some potency . . . between their bodies. They are matched to each other and to nobody else. I know it, Amoret . . . it's hard to explain these things to you. But I know no lovers have had more than we've known. We've been to the stars in those moments."

"And is that some potency between bodies?" she asked thoughtfully. A dawn of answer woke in her. Yes, there must be matching. But it was not the matching between bodies. It was in one's self the matching must be found . . . the joyous, adoring confirmation between one's own mind and body in love . . . so all-encompassing that one could not know where body left off and mind began. Was there any man on this earth with whom that might happen to her?

"It will always be there for us, Amoret," Stephen was saying ardently, not guessing what brave heresy had spoken within her. "As long as we live. Wherever we are. If there were a continent between us, something would leap up in your body when you thought of me . . . my blood would plunge in my veins when I said your name."

"Stephen, please . . ."

"I know the way you feel about me. I've lain in my bed night after night wanting you. And I've known that down that hall, in that damnable room you've imprisoned yourself in, you've been lying in your prim little bed wanting me. Wanting me and not being able to come to me."

She was crying now, unexpectedly. That body he insisted upon talking about, that lonely, bewildered body was having its way. A sad vagrant, it was running about, rapping on the doors of her mind, and hearing no answer within which it dared accept.

For the name it was whispering as it rapped on those doors was not Stephen, but Joel Adams!

Her mind, swift moderator of errant desire, converted the ecstatic cry into decorous pleading for help, but the body, ardent and denied, was not persuaded. It knew.

"Amoret, I could make you beg me to stay," Stephen was saying. "You know I could . . . I can feel something different in you tonight . . . You have been dead, but tonight you

have waked up to love again . . . I can see it. . . ." She shook her head vehemently, not trusting her voice to speak. And yet, perhaps if he did take her in his arms at this moment . . . perhaps she must beg him not to go, for all their sakes. For Joel's sake, most of all.

"I want you to think about me until you want me again. When I come back in a few months, everything will be different. I'll court you again. And you'll marry me again. This time, with all there is of you."

He took his hands from her shoulders, because he could feel her trembling, and he was afraid that in another moment he would begin that inevitable swift journey which took him only into emptiness. He dared not risk one of those brutal failures now. He must wait until he came home. A woman like Amoret could not resist what adventure adds to a man. And gold, besides. He would buy her everything she would want and hang her with emeralds. She should have that golden harp . . . he had meant to buy one long before this, but somehow it had slipped his mind . . .

"Spend the time loving me, Amoret. And when I'm rich . . ."

She looked at him now, and the sight of his great blind need erased all her own clamoring and despair. He was so far from knowing and understanding, so lost in his own tired worldliness that for a moment her compassion opened again in her, and she loved him, not as her husband but as a reluctant pilgrim lost on a quest, which was a secret even from himself.

"Stephen," she said imploringly, "you never can make yourself rich from the outside. You've tried that way, and you have nothing to show for it. Try the other way . . . try working on the inside . . . where the great riches are!" His face, tragic under the bravado of his lovemaking, turned away from her. They went up the steps of the house, with its duplicated wide wings. He had made himself rich in house, but one wing was empty of furnishings, and both were empty of love.

The house with all its touching magnificence and boastfulness, was a picture of the "nothing" which Tobias had warned about. Somehow Stephen still could not recognize it. Plain as it was, heartbreaking as it was, he missed the mean-

ing. Now he was turning his steps towards even greater riches and even greater "nothing."

(4)

All day Friday Amoret worked in the office of the mill, with ecstasy so keen it was a kind of numbness, deadening her. She walked along a tightrope that day, balancing giddily to keep from falling, for on one side lay fright and desolation, because for the first time in her life, she was a woman completely alone, and on the other side lay a dazzling possibility into which she could not allow herself to peer.

The dawn leave-taking had been solemn and without ceremony. The wagons with their hoods of new canvas stopped at the foot of Phelps Hill, and Stephen, unfamiliar and tall in his rough clothes, opened and closed the white front door and ran down the slope. He climbed into the lead wagon and never looked back. Through the open window, Amoret heard the slow rumble diminish and finally deaden to silence, while a bird waked in her lilac tree and complained in a sleepy treble.

She knew even then, amid the chaos of relief and terror because Stephen really had gone, that before night she herself would have taken the first step on a journey much more perilous than his. She might ignore knowing it all day, but by night she would be standing in the presence of decision.

Mr. Twicker's oldest son was the foreman of the mill. He would have liked going with the others, Amoret suspected, but he had a club foot. ("That's why he has to use his head," Stephen had said to Amoret when he first hired him.) He was a reliable employee, accustomed to seeing Amoret in the office. At noon he appeared hesitantly in the door of the office and said, "Miz Phelps, ma'am, you know we usually close down for dinnertime. But if you want me to stay around . . ."

"Of course not," she said. "You go along, Dan. I'll finish what I'm doing before I have my dinner." But she knew she couldn't go up to the empty house alone, so she decided to stay quietly in the office; she wasn't hungry anyway . . . At one o'clock she glanced out the window and saw an unexpected sight. There was that round little apple-dumpling of an

Annie Crow, walking stiff-legged down the hill with her starched skirts blowing out behind her, carrying a little basket in her hand.

"I brought you your dinner, Miz Phelps," she said. "If you ain't got sense enough to come up to the house and eat proper in the middle of the day, then the victuals must come to you."

"Why, Annie, where on earth did you come from?"

"From my kitchen in your nice house," she said pertly, "where I belong. I had my sister's boy drive me over first thing this mornin'. You don't suppose I'd let you stay in that big house by yourself, do you?" Motherly tears cluttered up her eyes for a moment, then she brushed them away with tidy indignation.

"I hadn't begun to suppose anything yet," Amoret said helplessly.

"Miz Phelps, somethin' is always goin' to take care of you. Sometimes it'll be one person and sometimes another, but you'll never be left alone."

Then, to counteract this odd burst of affection, she said sternly, "I brought your dinner down today, but don't think I'm going to bring it every day. If you haven't got any better sense than to work like a man, you kin at least show as much sense as they show about eating regular. Hereafter, you'll come up to the house and eat a proper hot dinner."

About four o'clock Amoret felt that she could not endure more of the bare office, so she put away her papers and ledgers and went up the hill. She dreaded to open the door and go in. What she had said to Stephen about the house being full of nothing seemed as true for her as it was for him. But when she did go in, the house was not empty; she heard flutelike festoons of music from her canary bird, and somewhere off upstairs Annie Crow was rocking wheezily and singing at the top of her lungs. No, the house would never again be full of "nothing." She would bring new good things into it; she dared not yet admit what those good things would be nor how long it would take her to bring them, but something would come to fill this space.

Only last week Joel had preached about "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." He had spoken about the "fullness of joy," and the "plentitude of peace" . . . there was nothing empty about God's way of doing things. His way was

the cup that runneth over; you knew it wherever you looked and saw Him . . . She went up the stairs and turned to the right along the gallery and down the hall to the room where she heard the rocking, and there was Annie Crow sitting in a sun-flooded western window, with billows of darning and mending around her, looking as cozy as only a contented, sewing woman can look.

"I've moved your pretty little things back where they belong. Miz Phelps," she said, not glancing up from the darning. That was all they ever said about the state of affairs which had driven Annie Crow out of the house.

When Amoret went tentatively into the big master chamber, the familiar violet and orris fragrance from her sachets was in the air, and Tobias' Book lay open on the round reading table beside the window. She went over to the great high bed and, turning back the heavily ruffled pillow shams, she put her hand on Stephen's pillow. She closed her eyes and said a wordless good-bye to him, more eloquent than she had been able to say when he stood before her.

All day she had gone about her proper quiet way. But under everything she did was the shattering knowledge of what she was going to do tonight. She had no name for what she planned; she did not say it explicitly, but she knew that she would take the first step. She knew she would strike the first spark, and the fire that would spring up would have its own way. It would destroy or it would purify. She rejected that figure of speech, because it reminded her of that other fire, which had been caused, in part, by this very love.

She sent Annie out to ask the Knight boy to get the carriage ready to drive her to Mount Hollow. A glimpse of herself in the mirror putting on a long cape over the plain alpaca dress which she had worn all day, reminded her of how different was this man from anyone she had known before. She would have expected herself to be putting on her most becoming frock for such an errand as this (if she could have imagined such a scene at all!). But this man to whom she was going had never seen her gowns; he looked only for beauty which might be worn invisibly. Nevertheless, at the last moment she ran back to her bedroom and patted a whisper of violet eau de cologne in the small hollow below her throat.

It was late twilight when they drove down Main Street and stopped at the small neat house serving as the parsonage.

Hardly thinking why, she avoided the prim front porch and went instead along the new-laid brick wall through the garden Mr. Adams had just spaded up. She rapped timidly on the side door, and for a few minutes she thought no one was within. Then she heard his footsteps, and in a second the door was open, and he was looking down at her. The round-globed oil lamp which the ladies had given him for Christmas was glowing behind him, casting his face into purple and golden hollows and planes. The two spearheads of white hair, erect and puckish above his brow, made his face unfamiliar, as it always seemed in that first moment before you remembered the change in him.

She strained her whole body up toward him, as if she would see how deep the change lay. She found herself suddenly unable to speak to him. His face at the sight of her had melted, then had set into hard lines of strain. He looked weary and ill, as if he had not slept. This new strange thing which had come between them distorted his whole face.

For the first time since they had known each other, Stephen was not in the offing. Always before they had talked in quick, small snatches; with Stephen always at hand, they had no time for long, indefinite conversations. If they were to say anything at all to each other, they must come quickly to the heart of the matter. So they always had come, in a swift rush of intimacy.

But now here they were alone in a room for almost the first time, alone in a year which was only beginning tonight. And the love which she had been the last person in the town to realize was blazing in this room and in this night. Until now it could blaze without danger, because Stephen was always present, masterful enough to hold back even the fire of another man's love. But now Stephen was gone, traveling farther and farther away with every hour.

Before either of them quite realized it was going to happen, he reached down and took her into his arms. It was as natural as sunshine flooding into a room when a door has opened. For a long time, they did not even kiss, only standing close and quiet in a held benediction. Then she took her arms from around his neck and bent down his face and smoothed the gash of wrinkle beside his mouth. She looked into his eyes understandingly before she finally kissed him.

The kiss sent its realization clamoring through them in a

way that left no sleeping cell deaf to the music. The kiss decided the matter conclusively, and both of them knew there dared be no dallying with this danger. They drew away from each other quickly, and Amoret went over beside the lamp, and sat down in the straight chair where Joel usually did his reading. For a moment he kept his back to her, then he turned and looked searchingly at her to see what mischief had been done.

"I knew this would happen, ma'am," he said. "I've thought of nothing else since Bud Artor broke his leg."

"Don't let's pretend there's any blame for it."

"Blame?" he repeated the word thoughtfully. "There'd only be blame if you let it go on, ma'am."

"How could it go on?" she asked, not rhetorically, but because she hoped he had worked out some plan for her to accept. But he answered her from that hypothesis of faultlessness which he held as her true portrait.

"I know it couldn't go on, ma'am," he said. She saw then that the mad possibility which had been her torturing delight all this day, had not yet been accepted by him. But he would accept it when he knew how she felt . . . Nothing else would matter to him, when he understood. Just as nothing else mattered to her now.

They would bring it all about in some wonderful natural way. They would open their two hearts to the clean good air; they would lay their secret in the sunlight with nothing to hide. And if this town could not understand how good a thing it was, they would leave . . . Her mind was a top spinning so swiftly all outlines were lost, and the figures of her thinking were only tremulous darts of light.

"I've only made you sorry for me, letting you know how much I cared for you," Joel Adams was saying. "I had no right to do that, ma'am."

"But . . ."

"I don't suppose I would have dared to do it, if I could have looked ahead to see Mr. Phelps leaving . . ."

"We would have come to this moment sometime anyway, Joel. It isn't Stephen's leaving that makes any difference."

"It makes no difference in the way I feel about you, ma'am," he said. "I couldn't love you more than I do. And I don't know how to love you less, hard as I've tried."

All the tenderness in her surged up at the humbleness of

his words. This good man, who never had known the beauty and the bounty of being loved as she could love him! They would build a house of their love, a snug house beautiful for two as Joel's house had been for one. At arm's length, and with never laying a finger on her, this man had taught her more about love than all the fierce possessing! She glanced into his face, his unguessing face.

"But now, with your husband away, and you needing my help . . . and the town seeing long ago what was in my heart about you, it wouldn't be fair to you, ma'am, to let things be this way . . ."

"This way?" she asked dully, hardly able to speak from out the luminous wealth of what she was seeing for them both.

"With no husband to protect you . . . from me."

He mumbled the words guiltily, like a boy. She bent her head so he could not see the rapture in her eyes. She would have to tell him in words. A man like Stephen, wise in love, would guess. But this man, so humble in his genius, would never presume to know until he had been shown unmistakably.

"Joel, you haven't begun to think about this yet," she said uncertainly. Before he answered, he leaned over her and took her hands in his.

"Look up at me, ma'am," he said gently. Their eyes drank deep of each other for a long minute. "I've thought about nothing else since the starting-off party the other night," he said at last. Then he walked away from her to the other side of the room, as if the distance between them must be kept.

"I couldn't let a hair of your head be harmed. You know that."

"What could harm me, Joel?"

"I could," he said. "I could love you so much I could let it destroy you. I could make you forget everything you know, Amoret. For I've such love in me for you that I could build a whole new world in you. I've loved you so long, and thought about you so much . . . every day wanting you . . . finding things to show you, storing up things to tell you . . ."

He stopped then, for this was not what he had intended saying to her. This came pouring out of him in rough whispered eloquence.

"If you were an ordinary woman, we could make our world out of man-and-woman love . . ."

"An ordinary woman . . . ?"

"The children," he said simply. "And what you have to do. For the world, Amoret."

The words stunned her with a splintering of shock. She had not forgotten the children. She never forgot them for a moment, awake or asleep. But in the traitorous astigmatism of desire, she had thought with some cruel illogic that there would be a way of twisting everything to fit . . . the children, the town, the beloved church . . . all of these, and her own deep consecration, somehow fitting into the house which she and Joel could build out of their love for each other.

At his words, she knew how mad this thought had been. Her children would be lost to her . . . more lost than they had been while half a continent lay between them. And that solemn heritage she held for them would be spilled in ridicule upon the barren ground on which she stood.

She saw it now for what it was, the cunning snare which would use the very highest thing she knew to undo her sacred purpose.

"I couldn't harm a hair of your head," he said again, in his gentle yet stern voice. "And I couldn't hurt this town, either. These neighbors who trust me, ma'am . . . who wanted me back all these years. I couldn't harm them by what they might think about me, if I stayed here while your husband was gone."

"You can't go away," she cried quickly. "You did that once, Joel."

"No. I have my work to do here." The room was quiet; the lamplight was a golden net which held them safely apart.

"You mean . . . you think perhaps I should go away somewhere?"

"No. I've thought about that, too. That wouldn't be fair to you, either. You love this place, the way I love it. You've planted your heart in it, just as much as I've planted mine."

"I have," she admitted wonderingly, "I've planted my heart in it."

"And there's one other thing, ma'am."

"What's that?"

"The neighbors need you here . . . the way people need a star to look at and think about. You couldn't take away from them what they see in you, Miz Phelps. That belongs to

them. It's something God gave them to make up for the hardships and the ugliness . . ."

She said slowly, "Then what shall we do?"

He came over to where she was, as if he understood that all the danger for them as man and woman had been safely passed now. He took her hand, and turned it in his own and touched the callouses as another man might have admired jewels.

"Well, last night . . . I went over . . . and asked Opal Larsen if she would do me the honor of being my wife."

Opal. Of course. Opal, who always would be filled to her brim with her love of Elk.

"And she?"

"Next Sunday, ma'am. We'll have a quiet wedding. Fitten." Yes, Opal would understand this strange thing. She could fine herself one side of that marriage without consternation or prying. She would nurture what was there of nobleness and good, without any forgery of hope nor any damaging of pride.

(5)

Afterwards, because of the telegram, Amoret never could remember exactly all she had felt as she drove home beside the Knight boy, in the chill April moonlight. She did remember that after she was seated in the carriage, she had got out again and had gone back up the path. Joel was still standing in the half-shut door, a bronzed silhouette against the narrow panel of lamplight.

"I have to say one more thing," she had said impulsively.

"Yes?"

"With everything else you've given me, Mr. Adams . . . tonight you've given me back my children."

"I don't see, ma'am . . ." He had started to speak, but she had stopped him.

"I know you don't see. But I want to tell you anyway. You've given them back to me tonight. And I'll never let them be lost again. Tomorrow I'm going East to bring them back . . ."

As she said the words, her whole plan was clear to her. She

told it to him excitedly, and he nodded quietly in agreement.

"Yes . . . that's the way," he said. "That makes the whole thing seem easier."

Tomorrow she would write a letter to Mr. Purvis. She would not ask him to send back her children. She would tell him that she was leaving immediately to come and get them. They were two years older now, but she knew exactly how they looked, for every day she had kept them before her heart, seeing them more accurately really than one could possibly see with eyes.

All the way home in the carriage, the Knight boy talked to her about himself, and she murmured and encouraged and advised. But under that placid surface, her mind was deeply at work. She must have lived a lifetime in that carriage, for the mind had grasped reasons which the slower heart would long protest. But the heart and the mind signed a pact that night, on the ride home, which assured not happiness but peace.

Nobody would ever know what happened tonight. Perhaps Joel himself did not fully understand how close she had come to the ruin of her whole life's purpose. Perhaps when they were old, she would ask him if he had known fully what had been offered to him tonight, which the solicitude of his love had protected her from giving. She knew now how much she had loved him, ever since he had come back . . . The chasteness of her mind had not allowed her to see that this love was the real reason she had moved from her husband's bedroom.

She had lived those months in full innocence as long as Stephen was in the house. It was right that she should live in this innocence, while she grew strong enough to accept a sacrifice. She would return to that innocence when the children were in the house again. She would be surrounded with her love for the children. There would be no fearsome emptiness in the everpresence of God's good, which had appeared tonight as the goodness of Joel Adams protecting her. She might have failed, but that Goodness would not let her fail. She was only a bewildered child who might have torn her purpose into bits tonight, but God had kept the purpose safe.

She thought with humble musing about prayer and answer. Answer came in strange ways, and sometimes men did not recognize it. Her life out here had been a long, growing prayer. A prayer in action you might almost say. Tonight had

been the answer to that prayer. Though the answer had seemed a "no" to this last unhappy year of loneliness and forbidden love for Joel, it was the "yes" to her lifetime's real desire. She saw it all quite clearly, and she felt she never could doubt God's care.

She turned like a tired child in the arms of this safety, and began thinking about her new life. Why had she not made this decision about her children long ago? With Stephen a whole day's journey away from her, she could not imagine why she had been so weak, why she had allowed herself to grieve in silence, when she might have insisted on changing things. But she was a different woman tonight; what was impossible to her once, looked simple and easy now. That was what growing meant!

Her letter would leave tomorrow but it would not arrive many days before she herself came to Philadelphia. She would travel alone, in the swiftest possible way. Already in her mind, she was doing a score of errands, packing a frugal traveling bag, writing to Harriet Phelps to ask her to return to Illinois as her guest. Poor Harriet had had a difficult ten years; the children hadn't turned out very well, and the Inn had meant drudgery and scheming. Eliza's long invalidism had been a tax on everyone's endurance . . . everyone's but Eliza's. Strength and power was flowing through Amoret's limbs now. She had left Philadelphia as a helpless dazed girl; she was going back as a competent woman. She had something in her with which she could strengthen every one of them.

As they drove up the banjo-shaped driveway, they saw that all the windows of the right wing of her house had been lighted.

"Must be company, Miz Phelps," the Knight boy said. "Was you expecting evening company, ma'am?"

"It's probably Mrs. Larsen," Amoret said, picturing Opal and Nora and Emily driving over to tell her the sudden wonderful thing which had happened to them.

Perhaps she would wait until after the wedding to start East. Yes, she must do that for Opal. They would have the wedding in her parlor . . . no, the wedding would have to be in the church. But afterwards, the whole town must come back to the Phelps' house for a wedding feast.

Before Amoret had dismounted from the carriage, Annie

Crow had the front door opened. In the rectangle of light, her pudgy form was waiting, with the white apron tortured to a rag in her hands, and her pudding of a face sodden with weeping.

"Oh, Miz Phelps . . . somethin' awful has happened," she cried.

"What? Annie . . . tell me."

"We've had a teelgram, ma'am." She burst into fresh tears as she said the ominous word. "A gentleman from Springfield drove out with it."

"My husband . . . ? Something's happened to the caravan?" Amoret cried, and flew up the steps and seized the dampened envelope Annie Crow was holding out to her.

"Poor Mr. Phelps," Annie was sobbing. "He had no call to go, and now look what's happened to him . . ."

Amoret tore open the envelope. The first telegram she had ever received into her own hands. To think she had been so happy about Samuel Morse when he sent those first words of his back in 1844 skimming along the wire from Washington to Baltimore. She always felt as if she and Mr. Morse had a bond between them, because of those first words he chose to send . . . and now, here was the fruit of that invention bringing something terrible to her. She opened the sheet of paper and focused her eyes painfully on the words:

Stevie and darling little Harriet were both killed with our son Robert in runaway horse accident today. Heart-broken condolence. Letter follows.

Stanton Purvis

CHAPTER FIVE

The gold-seekers intended to be gone a year. But it was more than two years before the first of them came straggling back to Mount Hollow. It was nearly three years before Stephen himself returned. In some ways that three years seemed a lifetime to Amoret. Often, lying in the big high bed, which long ago had forgotten the smoky spice of Stephen and now breathed only the lonely fragrance of a woman-body, she tried to remember his dark eager face with the quirked eyebrows and the malicious but charming smile, and could not quite bring them to mind.

She could remember her brother-in-law, Trumbull Stacey, more easily, his too-long neck and his quick embarrassing pleasantness which was at the same time both cowardly and impudent. She could remember Benjamin Van Dyke, so kind and pedantic, and poor solid Horace who crashed like stone when the moment came. She could recall Mrs. Durkee with her crimped black hair winging up on each side. ("Durkee has a face like the back of a bun," Stephen used to say about her.) She could remember all the irrelevancies of her old life; indeed, these pictures floated before her mind unbidden, if she were too tired from her complex day at the mill and the brickyard.

But of Stephen's face she never could be quite certain. Stephen's face which had once been like the very sky over her, the horizon and boundary of all her desires and intentions, now had grown hazy and indistinct. She could but vaguely reproduce in her memory the thunder of his nearness which so many times had shattered through her, the quick lightning of his wit and his impatience, the lowering of his disapproval. But the memory of his face was gone, and the dark labyrinths of feelings which had joined her to him had been sealed up like catacombs.

In her loneliness sometimes she tried to return to the swift terrible delight of their passion, when each of them had brought to it one wing for the flying. But it was gone from memory. A childhood song could be brought back, the voice

of a tradesman, the pinching of a dancing slipper, all these were stored away and could be found again at will. But the waves of their passion which thundered against them, mounting higher and higher until they finally broke in crescendo and then overflowed the land with a languorous lassitude, seeping like tide-streams into every hidden hollow . . . These she could not remember. Not even that first night on the prairie when she had conceived her son . . . *Her son*. Those words were a freezing and a paralyzing that halted all other remembering.

It was easy to accept as a true portrait the commonly held legend of Stephen Phelps which the people in the village kept alive. His letters which came seldom were usually so impersonal that she could have put them up on the notice board that hung beside the entrance to the office of their weekly newspaper, the *Mount Hollow Record*. Stephen had kept a journal of the grueling trek out to California, and when he reached San Francisco, he tore some of the leaves out of this and mailed them back without further comment.

Grim hardship was recorded in terse, skeleton words. There was not enough grass to feed the horses. ("Some earlier travelers burned spaces to hold us back for fear they would be overtaken and would have to share the meager growth.") There was a river with a quicksand bottom, and frightened mules which refused to hurry across and so were sucked in. There was sickness so ravaging that the shores of the Platte River were lined with lantern-lighted tents in which the doomed shouted and gasped. There were untimely births and even more aggressive deaths along the way. There was the eloquent clutter of debris lining the trail, some of it heartbreakingly valuable yet now tragically useless because nobody had strength to carry it off, furniture and fallen cattle, and whole wagons, toppled on their sides in the sand. Thirst seemed to sear and parch the whole inside of their bodies. "We hold bullets in our mouths to keep our tongues from cleaving to the roofs of our mouths," Stephen wrote.

Once when the party was nearly starving, he rode ahead and overtook more than a hundred wagons, begging each for a chance to buy food. But no one would sell him even a pound of bacon though he offered ten dollars for it. As he rode past, he saw other men, hungrier even than he, lying half-buried in the dust, too weak to go on.

"There was plenty of money," he wrote, "but no one can eat money, either silver or gold." There was mutiny and dirt and thievery and anguish all along the way, and a waning glimmer of hope, no brighter than a star and no closer.

The only part of this dreary recounting which could not have been read by anyone in the town was a page out of delirium written while Stephen suffered from what was feared to be cholera, then was diagnosed as colic and cured by a caustic brew of ginger and sage. She read the words with stricken breath.

My Beloved is like the cool of water on a fevered tongue. When she lies upon my breast her whiteness is a light which parts my flesh and fingers my bones. My sinews are as harpstrings when my thighs encompass her whiteness. Her hair is sweet as the rushes beside a secret spring. Golden rushes that whisper when the wind of my passion strums upon them. She is a secret stream, my Beloved, and I cannot find her in the desert. Her name is bread in my mouth, and wine is less potent than her kiss. But her kiss is taken from me, and even the bread of her name is withholden from my speech. . . .

(2)

During the first months when she was alone, it seemed to Amoret that she, too, was inhabiting a desert. Nothing was left to her that she needed or cherished or could even aspire toward. There was only emptiness and a sneer. Even the words which had ignited her mind when it lay in slumberous contentment now were bitterness in her brain. For many weeks the Book lay closed, and even the sight of it was mockery made manifest. Her glib understanding of what lay within the Book was silent now. It had come too easily. When it was tested, it dissolved like smoke. Its substance lay only in distance. Faith had sprung up like seeds in shallow ground; when the wind beat upon them and the sun scorched down on them, they withered because their roots were only threads.

Of the four great losses which had smitten her, the greatest and cruelest seemed the loss of God's hand. That hand had

held everything safe. God had laughed at her and had taken His hand away from her reach. One day He had absently unclasped His hand and let her world trickle through His fingers.

Not even Joel Adams could help her in this. He knew too well from his own hell of mocking, how gluttonously disbelief feeds on consolation, turning the very corn to husks. He remembered too keenly how wounded faith sucks the very nectar of promise and, by the canker in its own mouth, turns the sweetness into gall. So he offered her no words of comfort. All he had to help her was the fact of his own homecoming . . . not to the town, of course, for that was only the visible sign of the larger return to himself and to his work. All he could possibly say to her was in the showing of himself returned, the parable of his presence.

He did not even offer to open the Book for her during those first months. Instead, when he and Opal Adams drove over to sit with her during the long evenings, he read to her from other books, and if God's name was uttered in those texts, he said the word so humbly that she could not rail against it. He read history to her sometimes, and Opal slept in her chair, so confident of their love for her that she did not even have to disguise the sleeping.

"I love to hear you read, Mr. Adams," Opal said drowsily when they woke her for the drive home. "It's jest so purty it sings me to sleep like a baby."

He read her Tom Paine's burning words, and when he thought she could follow them, he ventured upon Blackstone's Commentaries; when those became too ponderous, he read Jonathan Swift's adventure tale, or some of the poetry which used to "line" his farm work as the venerable hymns had "lined" the Sunday service, before they owned their hymn books. He read Shelley and Keats and Robert Southey, and when nothing else was good enough, Shakespeare himself. All through the summer he kept with her the vigil beside her dead faith, and when October came and the heavy curtains had to be drawn across the windows to keep out the prying wind, he and Opal were still driving over once or twice a week to while away the long evenings.

Then one night in the middle of an Oliver Goldsmith play at which a moment before she had been laughing with delight, Amoret suddenly said, "Mr. Adams . . . why haven't

you ever read me any of the Bible?" He put down the book and looked at her, careful of the moment.

"You never asked me to, ma'am," he said gently.

She put her hands up over her face then, and for the first time since she had been alone, they saw her weep.

"Jest cry, honey," Opal said. "Tears heal you from the inside sometimes, when nothing from the outside can find the hurt."

But Joel knew that she was crying not with grief now, but with gratitude, for he had traveled this same way himself. She wiped her eyes after a moment and got up and walked around the room and for the first time, she stepped with her own eager grace.

"You're going to be well now, ma'am," he said to her. "I can tell by the way you hold up your head."

"No, you can tell by the way I hold up my spirit," she told him, and went to where he sat and sank on the hassock at his feet, and looked up at him with radiant returning in her face.

"I'm back now," she said. "I've been coming back a little each day, and now I know I'll be worth something again."

During the next months she became worth more than she ever had been before. One more woman had been added to the many that dwelt in her, a compassionate woman who had known the inside of grief. She seemed to live now for the townspeople. She opened the mansion day and night to them. She filled the rooms with women sewing and children grimly "practicing" on the piano which had been Stephen's last gift. Whenever there was a sick child who needed special care, she had it moved into one of her own spare bedrooms, and to the oldest of the Knight girls who had a way with illness, she paid a nurse's fees.

"We'll start a little hospital in the town," she said glowingly to the ladies. "Our church treasury is beginning to be very respectable now, with all the business that has come to the brickyard. We can't use the money just for the church . . . we must begin helping the town with it. . . ."

"I reckon a church is jest like a human," Opal said. "It learns to take care of itself first, and then it learns to take care of other people."

Once a week there was a reading circle that came up from the town and listened to the books in Stephen's library. "'Course some of 'em jest come because we ain't had any real

good sociables since the men went away. And they like the spread Mrs. Phelps always gits out afterwards . . ." Mrs. Burden said.

The biggest thing accomplished that first year was the opening of the school in the left wing. "And to think I never knew why that wing was built!" Amoret said many times to herself, sitting in her office at the mill and watching the children trooping up the hill in their red mittens. "It was built to be filled with children." Sometimes she bent her head to keep a tear from dropping on her hands clasped in her lap, because among the twenty children in the house were none who were her own.

But during this time of famine, she had learned to love whatever was at hand. She learned it in the only possible way, from having to, if the heart is not to starve to death. She tried to explain to Joel what this meant, but the words would not even sketch the wonder. He listened to her faltering, then he said, "Yes, we would all choose the smaller love if we could, and make it a circle around somebody. If we're not allowed to do that, then we stretch it to include the world. I reckon the poor lonely world needs that kind of lovers, ma'am."

"I suppose we ought to be proud we've been picked for that."

He looked carefully at her a moment. "Maybe it's too soon yet for you to be glad." Then he added with rueful honesty, "It's always too soon, I guess, for the heart to want to be as big as the soul is."

He permitted himself then one of his rare confessions. "If I live to be a hundred, and know in my mind all that time how wonderful a thing God has given me to see, I reckon my heart will still be wishin' it could have had what it wanted, ma'am."

"It could have had it, Joel . . . it came to your house and offered itself," she said. But he shook his head imploringly, unable to speak about that night when God had kept him bigger than his usual size.

When she mused over the unwelcome miracle which had taken all the human objects of her love, and had given her only a world in their place, it sometimes presented itself to her understanding as an allegory. Love had been a snug little room, with all her treasures safe within. The walls had held

back the alien night, and even the windows, glassed against the darkness, had shown only the mirrored glow of her own hearthfire and candlelight.

When she had been thrust out of that room, she had been lost in wildness and wind and the big emptiness without. She had wandered in the peopled emptiness disconsolately. Incredulously at last she began to see what needed her in the emptiness, because the heart which has loved must always remain an instrument of love.

Then what was without had become as what had been within, so that she dwelt now in a new room, as wide as the world, as high as the sky! Housed within its vastness were all people for her to enjoy and cherish. She had been driven out of the earth of the snug little room. But she had been thrust into a wider heaven. "Love has bigger rooms than happiness ever dreams of," she said humbly to herself.

The townspeople were pleased about having access to the fine big Phelps house, but they had no illusions about it. "'Course, when Mr. Phelps comes back, he'll sweep everything right out prompt," they said meekly. "But meantime, we might as well enjoy things."

Almost every day Amoret left her work and came over to the school, where she introduced many innovations to make learning a more acceptable pill to the young.

"A word by itself hasn't much meaning," she said to Miss Garvin. "Just the same way people have to be with other people to mean anything . . ."

Miss Garvin, the buck-toothed teacher they had hired from the church's treasury, was willing but unimaginative. "I give 'em a list of words to spell, Miz Phelps."

"Yes, but let's have them spell the words and then put them immediately to work in sentences," Amoret said and she wrote down sample sentences which delighted the pupils.

Probably because her own arithmetic was an unsteady scaffolding, it was she who thought of making little stories out of the multiplication tables and the simple additions. "If Mary Merter has two apples and Lem Artor says he'll give her three times as many . . ."

Mr. Dane drove over to the school one morning to ask Miss Garvin please to ask Miz Phelps to make up a problem with little Joseph's name in it. "The boy feels slighted," Mr. Dane said with dignity. "We support the school same as everybody

else, and we figger Joseph ought to be in a problem." So Amoret thought him up a lovely big one; no little apples or quarts of milk for Joseph; he had gold in his problem. "If Joseph Dane has \$542.83 and he brings back from California \$3495.62 . . ."

(3)

Many times as she had lain alone in the night, she had tried to imagine what it would be like to have Stephen come back to her. She never doubted that he would come, and she pictured his coming in a hundred different ways. His rare letters told her little. He was on the verge of signing a partnership with some men from Boston . . . but the next letter did not mention them; he wrote sometimes from one place, and a few months later was living in another. She had no way of reading what lay between the letters, nor knowing whether it meant success or failure.

Sometimes she pictured him driving up to the door in a handsome equipage; trunks and boxes would be stacked high on the back of his carriage, filled with Mexican tapestries and jewels, laces and linens and blankets woven of fleecy llama wool. She must remember to try and admire them sufficiently. . . . Or he might come like a peddler with all he had left of his possessions strapped to his back. He might arrive at night so she would not be too grieved by the sight of him. Annie Crow would open the front door to a casual-sounding knock, and he would fall forward at her feet . . . He might send for Amoret to meet him somewhere in the West. Or a letter would come in an unknown handwriting, saying that he was lying ill and had asked someone to write, and she would rise from the table or the bed or the desk and not even delay to change her clothes. She might travel to some strange city and there find him ensconced in absurd luxury . . . a sort of burlesque of luxury, which would be his half-mocking way of showing her how fabulous had been his success.

But however it happened, he would come back to her somehow. He had said there was a drawing between them which never could be denied, even if both wished to be absolved of it. She knew that as long as he believed this, he would come back. Whenever she tried to picture what it

would be like for her to have him back, her mind was thrown into helpless confusion.

Yet when he came, she found no uncertainty in the meeting. It was a winter night on which he returned, after nearly three years. The earth had regained its own sculptured shape, beautifully simplified when the clutter of underbrush and prairie grass was gone. The hills were white, with pockets of blue in the hollows; a wrinkled frozen cream seemed to have risen as if the deep snow were moonmilk. A glaze of pearl enameled the earth, and the night was so quiet you could hear the most miniature sound magnified to nearness, the snapping of a twig where too much ice had bent it, the long soughing sigh of the imprisoned river, the subtle snuffling of fur at the crotched root of an elm.

There is nothing lonelier than a white-bound night with no one near. The moon had seemed to put out the companionable lights in the neighbors' windows, and the houses appeared, as they had that first twilight when Amoret and Stephen had arrived here, like hump-backed dwarfs, in withdrawn silhouette, sinister and secretive. Last night they had held a spelling bee in the schoolroom and this hill had been loud with neighborliness. But tonight the hill was forlorn, and loneliness drove her into work.

Amoret left the house after dinner and walked down to the mill, carrying a lantern which swung her shadow in swoops and bounds up against the dark trees. Annie Crow would finish the supper dishes and set the bread for tomorrow, then she too would hood herself in her old gray shawl, mutteringly light her lantern and stalk stiff-leggedly down the hill to sit in the office, nodding and knitting. She pretended she came because it wasn't fitten for Amoret to be in the mill alone, what with the public highway passing so close, and traffic now being so free on the road. But actually Annie came because she could not bear the loneliness in the big echoing house on the nights when the community had no doin's at the Phelps.

"Seems like the place is always lonelier after we've had some kind of gatherin'," Annie Crow complained, and Amoret had to agree.

Before it was time for Annie Crow to come, Amoret heard the thunder and clatter of the stage as it crossed the bridge below the dam; the horses' hoofs made a ringing metallic

screech that you could hear even above the thunder of the wheels. Then, abruptly, the stage stopped, and she heard voices. It was probably only that the snow clogs which the horses wore for this bad driving had become packed with loose snow. Sometimes the driver had to stop the stage and get out and dig them free. After a moment the stage lumbered on, and peering out the frost-fronded window of the mill office, Amoret saw its jangle of lights and its huge shadow moving off along the highway.

There was another shadow, then, that detached itself from the black grate-slats of the trees, a tall shadow, made even taller by a stovepipe hat. A long swerve of shawl bellied out behind the lean swiftmess. But it could be from no one she recognized, that shadow, for it walked with a lunging limp. It strode unevenly and impatiently as a man would who had a long-healed limp which he would not accept. It could be no one she knew . . . it must be some wayfarer, who would want to hire her carriage to drive out along the back cut-off to one of the new farms which were springing up there.

But all the time she was explaining this to herself, her heart was pounding suffocatingly in her throat. All the time she was explaining it, she was seizing her own cloak, and running recklessly down the stairs and out across the loading platform and down the steep steps at the other side. She was running up the short stretch of the road to the main highway, and her breath was galloping in her breast. The tall lurching figure was coming toward her. When he saw her, he dropped his carpet bag in the road and ran toward her, with his shawl billowing like wings around him.

Around them both, for in a moment she was fast in his arms, and his cold hands were holding her so close that neither of them could speak, nor needed any words. There were tears on her face, and she could not be sure whose eyes they came from. There were kisses on her lips, and they were the kisses she would have known in heaven or in hell. She put her hands up around his face and moved it out of a shadow so that she could see him better. The same face, unchastened and proud, with a dare in the eye, and a disarming smile on the mouth! But the mouth wasn't smiling now; the lips had that wiry look of Stephen under emotion.

"You're more beautiful than ever," he whispered. "I got so

I believed I was only imagining how beautiful you were, Amoret." She reached up and pushed back the hood of her cloak with naïve joy in remembering that her hair was what he most admired. In his eyes she could see what purpling shadows lay among the gold, and she stepped back from him and opened her cloak so that he could have the swift pleasure that lay for him in the long undulant sweep from breast to knee. The instinctive gesture told him more than any words. The richness and the lavishness of her beauty, and her simple way of offering it to his eyes, broke a flood of longing in him, and he gathered her to him quickly for fear he would say some shameful word to reveal how much he had suffered through these years without her.

When he could speak again, he said, "I've brought you nothing, Amoret. I might as well tell you early as later . . . I've barely been able to make my way back to you."

"That's all I wanted you to bring me," she said. "I told you when you left . . ."

"Oh, God! I've given myself three years of hell. For nothing. And less than nothing, for I've even lost some of what I started out with."

"Lost?"

He pointed down at his foot, and she saw that he was standing with his full weight on his right leg.

"I get around," he said impatiently. "It's nothing to be concerned about. Except that it makes a punished-looking thing out of me, hippety-hopping like a lame crane."

He ran back up the road and picked up his bag, exaggerating his lameness with a wry comical face turned over his shoulder so she could see by his jesting that his limp was unimportant.

"I'm afraid you'll have to give up dancing, my darling," he said, coming back to her, "unless you can learn a hippety-hop step to fit in with mine."

She wanted to say, "I can learn anything to fit in with you," but she was afraid to trust herself to say it, for fear she would burst into tears of pity at the tragic audacity of him, shabby and broken and lamed and making a joke about it. In all the kaleidoscope of emotions that had shifted through her long drama with this man, this was the first shape of pity which had come into the pattern. Not because he had failed.

Not because he was in rags. But because his most intimate possession, that masterful handsomeness of his, had been maimed.

No, it was more subtle than that; it was really that his inner lameness which he had gallantly concealed had now come out into his appearance, where nothing could hide it. His charm and his play-acting could disguise it, as they had tried to disguise his inner lameness. But nothing could conceal it. It had found him out.

He went up the stairs of the mill office and looked around without a word, and she could not tell whether he was pleased or uncomfortable because she had had to move in another table and a larger desk. She blew out the lamp, and the room leaped into strange beauty as the windows laid carpets of moonlight here and there across the floor.

"You've got on well without me," he said as they came out of the mill. "Maybe I should just go back, without letting the town know I've come home."

"You haven't come home to the town," she said. "You've come home to me, and I'll never let you go again."

They walked up the slope to their large spread-winged house. His right arm was flung around her, and she could feel his limp in every pore. But he was seeing only the house on the crown of the hill.

"I thought sometimes I must have dreamed it," he said. "I thought maybe I had dreamed the whole fifteen years, Amoret, and that I'd wake up at Wide Acres, getting ready for the Meschianza."

"No. Wide Acres was the dream," she said soberly. "This is the reality and always will be, Stephen. Because this we've made out of the substance of things hoped for."

The moment the quotation had slipped so spontaneously into her sentence, she wanted to stop her mouth and beg him to forgive her. She wanted to assure him that this wasn't going to happen again. She was a wiser woman now; she knew how to hold her peace without troubling words. She knew how to love him now, without torturing them both because of what was not. But he had not even noticed the words, for he was still looking up at the house, and a gleam of pride was creeping into his face. She understood how the house had enlarged itself and had become more handsome while he had been away among the crude frame shacks of the

Far West. When he had looked at it last, he had compared it with Philadelphia; but now he was comparing it with ugly slatsided shanties, and it was indeed a mansion.

"It's not a bad looking building," he said. "I'd like to have a fine photograph made of it and send it back to . . ." She knew in a swift spasm of pain that he was going to say "Stanton Purvis." So now it was her turn to pretend not to notice what was being said.

". . . to old Benjamin Van Dyke," he finished lamely. "That old geezer never expected much of me, you know. I'd like to show him."

Before they went into the house, he took her once more in his arms, and now the thin ice of his boastfulness had melted, and she felt the deep well of grief in him.

"Amoret . . . the hardest thing . . . has been the children," he said unsteadily. "To the longest day I live, I'll never forgive myself . . ." She looked up at him, begging him with her eyes not to speak about them, not to make her speak.

"No, let me say it," he cried. "I didn't get your letter for nearly a year . . . and when it came, it was written with nothing but wanting me not to blame myself . . ."

"I couldn't bear to have you suffer," she said. "You see, you have nothing to fall back on . . ."

He looked at her a long time, with the only humility she ever had seen in his face. "Nothing to fall back on . . . except you, Amoret. I had taken your children away from you . . . and when they were killed, you only wanted *me* not to suffer for what I had done. That's the mystery . . . the mystery of goodness. I had never seen such a thing before. I don't believe many men have . . ." She put her arms around his waist, and held him close, saying nothing.

"Have you got over the loss, Amoret?"

She shook her head, holding her lip steady with her teeth. "No, I haven't got over it. But I have made something out of it, Stephen. I've learned how to make something out of love for whatever is at hand . . ."

The door opened then, and Annie Crow peered out belligerently. The light from her lamp fell full on their faces.

"My land!" she said. "Come in this house afore you freeze to death, Mr. Phelps. Good thing I've got some nice pot pie left over from supper."

Before he would touch Annie's conjured-up supper . . .

brandied peaches to embellish the pot pie, dried corn plumped in cream and butter, piccalilli, cold tongue and ham and currant jelly and pie and more pie . . . he ran like a homesick boy from room to room in the right wing of the house.

He didn't go near the left wing, and putting his head on one side he said lugubriously, "That's always been the lame wing of this house . . . I know how it feels now to have a lame left wing. I guess maybe I never should have built that wing."

"No. It came to a good end," Amoret said. "Tomorrow I'll show you what we've done with it."

Before he would sit down at the table, he made himself resemble once again the master of the house, bathing and shaving and putting on his finest linen shirt. His great-clothes were too big for him now, but, Amoret thought protectively, this only added a certain lean elegance to him.

It was nearly midnight when he had finished the meal, with Amoret sitting opposite admiring every word, doting on every mouthful. The best china was before him, the most exquisite linen under his hand, and a pinched-looking little pot of Annie Crow's rose geranium set in the silver epergne in the center of the table.

"Oh, God! . . . it's the first civilized meal I've eaten in three years!" he said almost reverently. "I had to go away to find out what we had made for ourselves right here." She got up impulsively from her chair and ran around the table to hold his head against her breast.

"You found the gold after all!" she said.

Long after he was asleep in the big bed, she lay beside him wide awake, with happiness humming all along her body like a secret tune. She slipped from the bed, and ran across the cold floor to look out the window. The moon was setting now, but the white world was still unbearably beautiful from here. The white world seemed re-possessed, because she herself had come back to the haven of being possessed. Her body was straining up with eagerness and joy under her nightdress, not cringing and folded together as bodies sometimes are in cold. An inner sun seemed to have warmed every cell during the last hour, so that it had rounded to a bud and had bloomed in a flower of light.

There was something familiar to her in this figure of

speech, and she wrinkled her forehead trying to remember why it was familiar. Then it came back to her. It had been long ago, on the morning of the day Tobias' will was to be read. She had stood in just this way at a window, and her mind had thought of her body as a bough that did not yet know how to shape its own bud of delight. That had been so long ago . . . she had thought timidly then, not exultantly and fearlessly as she did now. She remembered the virginal branches on Stephen's espaliered peach trees that morning, reaching up as if to take their buds from the air. And she, too, had been reaching up; that was the first morning she had guessed in some faltering intuition what it might mean to have flowers of delight in her blood. She had known with some frightened prescience that if those buds ever bloomed in her, they must be formed only from within.

She had been half-ashamed then of trying to understand the ways of passion and the growing-up of a body to make itself a sweet-sounding instrument for love to play upon. She had known nothing of love then; it was only a maidenly word, a frivolous sachet to tuck into the heart. But now it was a matured fact without fear or reticence. Love was the fabric of which she was made now. . . .

It had been a long journey, and a blind one much of the time. She had walked along precarious edges and narrow passes; she had been lost in deserts and marooned on glaciers. She had tried to enter a forbidden valley where she had seen happiness with Joel Adams blooming as humbly and unashamedly as buttercups blowing in grass. She had stooped to gather that happiness, but the very goodness of it withheld it from her hand. She saw now how right the withholding had been.

For now, tonight, she had arrived at the full knowing, with mind and heart and body. She had in herself now the sum of the completed journey, the sublime wherewithal from which to make another child. The rounded season of her growing and her grief would have its full spring again, if she should find herself with child from this night.

She heard a stirring in the bed across the room. It was the most beautiful sound on earth in this place, which had been so still and large and lonely. Stephen was speaking sleepily. "I forgot to ask you, Amoret . . ."

"Yes, darling?"

"Will you marry me again?" His voice was furry with sleepiness, but his old delicious laughter was in it, and under the laughter was something deeper. She came running across the room to him and flung herself upon him in playfulness and prayer.

"It's too late to ask me," she said, kneeling beside his shoulder and peering in his face, so marvelously soothed and sweetened by this night.

"Too late?" he asked, gathering her close to him and resting his face against her in a beatific holiday from desire.

"Much too late," she whispered. "I am a long-married woman, Stephen, in love with my husband."

CHAPTER SIX

Now began her enchanted interlude. However the other parts of her life might scan, this swift passage through the next six years seemed written as poetry. Not always lilting lyrical poetry. Although there also were stanzas of that, which tripped off the tip of the day as effortlessly as music trilled by a child. Such moments as when her infant son first smiled with recognition into her face, and when one of the school children brought the baby a little quill which had fallen from the sky and said, "It's a letter to him, ma'am." There are small glints such as these on every day that has children in it, and Amoret's life now was tuned to the beauty of every small passing thing.

These little ballads and couplets and rhymes leaped between the paced marching of other meters, which seemed to hold all the events of this period in a safe, ordered pattern. Even when these events were not what she would have chosen, there was something foreordained and right about them, like a line of metrically written poetry, so that one could not protest against it, but could only read along, knowing that the rhythm would shape itself to a turn, in time, and be relieved by a new cadence, that the lines would sculpture themselves at the proper moment into a turning to which only this was the right ascent.

Whereas before she had seemed to live her life in short spans of meaning, each sustained by some blind trust in itself yet each to be survived without conscious relation to the whole, now there abode a knowledge in her that the whole *was* held in Mind, as the whole of the earth itself, and that the hollows must be there to round up the hills, that the arid, fallow days, not without their own bleak beauty, must be a resting place where the heart gathered its strength to withstand the gladness when it came. For the gladness that was given her these years was keener than any grief had been; if it were to keep its sensitiveness alive, the heart had to husband itself against that onslaught as prudently as it had armed itself against grief. For the blessings of the heart be-

come shapeless as sheared wool, unless it be spun into fine thread to be woven for warmth.

Her heart, during these years, was feeding on a subtle fare finding its necessary sustenance in infinitesimal tidbits, and invisible relishes, while it pushed aside the easy feasts. She saw her life now through to the end; there was no doubt in her now, for she had her last child, and she knew of what he had been made, and what his work was to be. But this time, she would make no mistake about it.

This time she would not declare that destined purpose, to tempt the winds of evil perverseness to tatter it into nothingness. She would be harmless as a dove this time. But also, she would be wise as a serpent. So that, if it were another serpent, the ancient impersonal one, she was challenged to meet in combat, she would have his own weapons. The harmlessness of the dove and the wisdom of the serpent must dwell side by side in her, not to negate each other, not to confound or contradict, but to reinforce. That was part of the whole. The heart which had not yet lived through the combat would hear the double admonition and reject one part of it; but Amoret knew now, and the knowing paradoxically took not one gentle touch from the harmlessness of the dove, but watched with wily ambushed wisdom to see that nothing harmed the dove.

She understood now what the warfare was. The oldest warfare in the universe; the mysterious duality which attacks every fact, from the microscopic to the infinite . . . the supposition that the good can be superseded by the evil or the meaningless; the chaos that lurks beside the shining line of order; the multifarious lie that husks itself about each grain of truth; the lawlessly inimical arrayed against the imperishable seed of love; the lust for destruction that is so savage that it will annihilate even the ultimate self, if that could guarantee perpetual black rest in which no gleam would tantalize to growth.

She understood it now, and knew that its name was Legion. Not because legions of men prefer its evil, but because they are asleep to its manipulations. Asleep in good nature and indolence or lustfulness or yearning or fear; and sometimes, of course, even in the despair of mischief-making for its weary self. But rarely is the dream of evil spun in that name, for that would outrage men's pride of dignity, and would arouse them to seeing on which side of the combat

they fight. For if the enmity stated itself baldly, it could find few recruits. It must cosmetize its purposes into glamorous miens. Its ancient method is to borrow good things and turn them to evil's use . . . ambition, duty, self-improvement, and that family pride which had been Stephen's disguise when the children were sent away. Under that disguise, and only half-perceived by him, lay the ancient design of evil, which is to bring to naught the innocent purpose of good.

But now there was to be another ambassador for that good purpose. There was another child conceived in a moment of whole-hearted physical love and of wide-angled spiritual vision. And this was the child who was to carry forward that heritage, that preposterous, sublime heritage which had been too negligible to probate in a court, and yet too powerful to lie dead in a will. Those words written in a will had come to life in Amoret's own living, replacing her fragile woman's sinews with thongs of spiritual invincibility, tautening the blurred fibers of her woman's brain to steel incisiveness, and giving to her soft woman's flesh fortitude and the patient biological youthfulness, which waited as long as it needed to wait, until circumstances ripened her to bear this child.

The answering between Stephen and herself was fortuitous in the forming of this child; the mating which really had brought it to birth was the fiery meeting of words in brain, the long-held, worked-out patience of vision pursued and lost and found and held again, until it came to pass in palpable creating.

And since the child needed for its hardy body and its serenity of mind one star-clear moment of perfectness, one coincidence of ardor and bliss for its conceiving, that moment had been. It blazed along the dark conduits of feeling like a torch igniting a million candles, like a clarion note setting off a thousand echoing trumpets across a staircase of mountain tops. That moment had cancelled out all miscalculations and errors between them. This fulfillment continued in them for weeks, like a slow Roman candle exploding against huge darkness. It fountained up long after the watchers thought it must have exhausted itself, and sent new drops of colored flame rolling silently down their sky. For many days after Stephen had come back to her, they both seemed bathed in a sublime mystery which flowered up from the secret calyx of that climax between them.

The tragic buffoonery of hope made them believe that now

since such fulfillment between them had been once attained, the wonder might be duplicated whenever they wished . . .

(2)

When the baby was born, he was quite the homeliest little creature Amoret ever had seen. His body was small and already seemed elderly; his head was large, with a beaked nose and a ponderous brow. The other children had been exquisite miniatures of Stephen, rather toylike in their perfection. But this child was ungainly even in his smallness. He resembled nobody except himself. He had a worried responsible look on his face, and when he cried, which he seldom did, his voice had a deep impatient boom, as if he were humiliated by his own helplessness and infancy.

Curiously enough Stephen thought he was beautiful from the first moment he saw him.

"Of course he's not," Amoret denied happily, "but that doesn't matter."

"He's distinguished-looking," Stephen said, half seriously. "Most babies look like silly watercolors painted by a second-rate sentimentalist. But this chap . . . why, I expect he's going to amount to something. What shall we call him, darling?"

"I've named him already," she said. "I want him called after your father."

"Tobias? Well, all right . . . but isn't that a bit old-fashioned?" he said hesitatingly, thinking that he would agree now and then persuade her later.

"No. His name is Tobias," she said with finality. He sat down beside her bed and thought it over, and she could see him reversing his first impression and deciding that after all it was a good name. She could see him deciding for his own reasons. Tobias Phelps in his day had been a well-known and well-loved man; as the years would go on, the legend of his benevolence would no doubt grow; he might eventually emerge as an historical character . . . not of the first magnitude, but perhaps of the second. If someone could be persuaded to write a life story of the old man . . . if Stephen Phelps could succeed in building up the fortune which had been lost through altruism in a crumbling world of finance,

why perhaps the whole ghastly experience could be re-interpreted on an idealistic plane. It might be made quite a wonderful American story, showing the ultimate triumph of a man's ideals of fortune-building carried through by his own children.

Stephen's lips were twisted with silent amusement thinking about this; he might even engage some scrivener to write such a book. It would be better than writing it himself, for that could give a more objective estimate of Stephen's own achievement . . . She could hear him thinking this clearly, as he mentally gave his consent to the naming of his son. For these base reasons, expediencies of vanity, she thought without scorn. But it did not matter on what basis he agreed.

Any more than it mattered how this child looked. She gazed down at him lying against her naked breast, with his bluish little claw of a hand inadvertently pushing away the nipple while his mouth angrily searched for it. A wave of compassion broke over her. He would have to endure the humiliation of babyhood, the ungainliness and pointlessness of little boyhood; he would have to wear the unhonored child's body, and speak with the ignored treble of the child's voice; he would have to utter his callow nothings and shape his mind with impotent rages and ambitions and frustrations, and whittle it to sharpness with plaything victories and despairs.

But all the time the spirit in him would be growing and becoming comely. The spirit of him would lie hidden and protected from the rude stare of his contemporaries and the patronizing nonsense of his elders. The spirit would learn humbleness and from humbleness, patience. From patience it would learn dominion, so that when its day came . . .

This would be no easily beguiled spirit which would grow too richly in the shallow soil of acceptable charming humanhood, like Stephen himself. The flesh would protect the spirit of this child, by keeping it humble and still, housed in an unenviable body.

When he became a little older, he lost none of his infant ugliness, as everyone had assured Amoret he surely would do.

"Some of the purtiest people is very homely babies, Miz Phelps," the neighbors had naïvely told her. "Personally, I'd rather birth a real homely child. Especially a boy. A man's got to have big strong features and those jest don't look becomin' on a baby. So don't you think nothin' of how little Tobias looks, ma'am."

"I love the way he looks," she said, and this they told each other fondly was just what you'd expect Miz Phelps to say.

"Does seem funny, though, when the other children was so handsome . . . you and Mr. Phelps are such uncommonly nice-looking people, yourselves."

"He's going to wear his good looks on the inside," Amoret said. "You wait and see."

When he began to speak, he had a deep persuasive voice for a two-year-old son. He wouldn't repeat whatever you wanted him to say. He would only smile courteously and shake his head, as if he had to wait until you progressed to wanting something sensible out of him.

"Say Da-Da," Stephen used to instruct him over and over. But the child would only shake his head and smile. After this had gone on for several weeks, little Tobias suddenly said with grave emphasis, "No, father. Please."

Stephen laughed so loudly they heard him down at the mill, and young Tom Larsen, who now was the foreman there, came up to the house to see what was the joke.

"That youngster of minel" Stephen cried. "He's going to teach *me* some amenities after all."

Tom had no idea what the word amenities meant, but he could plainly see that for some reason Stephen was delighted with his son.

"Say it again, Toby," he was saying now, on his knees before the baby. But little Toby had lost interest in the repetition. He went calmly about his play, until his father, cajoling, then commanding, and finally threatening, drove himself into a rage.

"By Gad! he's the stubbornest little animal I've ever had to deal with," he said mopping his forehead. "But I'll break his spirit."

"You'll never come near his spirit," Amoret said with such gentleness that he could not be certain whether or not she was sympathizing with him or taunting him.

(3)

To Stephen's surprise, he had not fitted too readily back into the life of the town. His money and his wife had been at work for him while he had been gone, and there had been a

simplicity and easiness about the way those two worked, which made the townspeople resent Stephen's rather impatient, opinionated way of handling affairs.

"I can't see that he does any better than Miz Phelps done, and she never made such a fuss about things," they said freely. "When Miz Phelps was asked to lend money, she either did or she didn't, but Mr. Phelps has got to examine all your papers and pry into all your business."

Indeed, Stephen was more businesslike than ever, after his California debacle, because he suspected that the town might think he was less shrewd than they had at first supposed him to be. The fact was that he had been completely out of his depth among the lawless, cheerful opportunists with whom he had been flung in the far West. That he had not been able to protect himself against the unscrupulous hoodlums who had drawn him into various partnerships and bargains was to him a source of deep rankling shame. It was curious that, in spite of his usual protective vanity, it had never once occurred to him that the reason he was an inevitable victim in such adventures as these was his native honesty and decency. His disastrous inability to make a success of the California venture was one spot where he might honestly have awarded himself praise, yet it was practically the only episode of his life which he did not interpret in some way entirely creditable to himself and as an evidence of his superiority. He felt that since intelligence was his dominant quality, that should have carried him victoriously through any chicanery. The simple fact was that he didn't know how to outwit crookedness.

It *was* characteristic of him, however, that he never stooped to explaining or accounting for those three years' absence. When Nat Burden or the blundering Knights or even kindly old Mr. Twicker tried to ask him about his experiences, he said bluntly, "Well, they're over, thank God, and I'm doing my best to forget them."

"Nothin' against a good man that he just has bad luck," they said comfortingly. "You're not the only man who seen the elephant in California."

"I suppose not." Stephen always felt consoled when he heard about "seeing the elephant"; the fact that such a term had been coined implied that this kind of failure was not in any way unique.

"I'm through with thinking about the whole trip. I'm just glad to get back here among you good honest people," he said.

Well, that was something, at least, they said to each other. They never expected to hear Mr. Phelps say he was glad to be here among *them*! Most of the time he had acted like he was here just because he couldn't help it. Their simple hearts warmed a little toward him. They would have been proud to like him, instead of only admiring him, for liking would have implied a certain sureness and equality which they didn't quite presume to claim. When they saw him limping about their street, trying to re-establish himself, they were nearer liking him than they ever had been.

They had fully expected that he would turn the school out of the left wing of his house, and they had their indignation all sharpened and ready against him. But he did nothing of the sort. In fact, he went in for an hour every day and taught the children geography, and read them some of the books he had liked when he was a boy.

"But this school isn't good enough for them," he said. "We'll keep it only until we get something better."

He went around talking up the need for better schools and school laws. The Continental Congress way back in 1787 had passed an act providing that when public lands were disposed of in the great northwestern territory, "640 acres in every township" should be reserved for school use. The enabling act which made Illinois a state had provided that "thirty-six sections, or one entire township in the state should be reserved for the use of a seminary of learning in the state." But there was still a big gap between the legislative intention and the realization. Stephen finally got a free school tax levied in the town. The tax was only three mills on every dollar of taxable property in the township, but it made the town rich in self-respect, and the parents who still could not read felt as responsible as the rest.

Stephen offered to give the bricks for the first schoolhouse, and after that there could not be much discussion as to whether or not it was "fitten" to call it the Phelps School. When it opened its doors in October of 1857, there were a hundred and twenty-six children who trooped in, scrubbed and important, to salute the flag and sing *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*. The school session was to be six months, and the prin-

cipal was Miss Garvin who did her buck-toothed best to discourage any frisky joy in learning.

"I'd rather have something prettier in the way of a teacher," Stephen said to Amoret. "After all, education is supposed to be one of the pleasant arts." But Miss Garvin was the best available, and they paid her \$80 a year and her board and room.

These were tense days in the politics of the state. Being Americans the townspeople each had a say, whether or not anyone could be found who would consent to listen to the say. Everyone was self-appointed authority, and even the women presumed to lay down opinions. Know-Nothingism was rampant through the town, for it was easier, as always, to rally hatred than it is to organize tolerance. The Know-Nothings were deadly afraid of what Irish labor might do to "pure American effort." Once that fear was aroused, there was a foreign-skinned enemy lurking behind every lathe and workbench and plow, plotting to steal the bread from American mouths. Some people said that the genuine Know-Nothings wouldn't even eat bacon unless they had a guarantee that it came from American hog. So for a while, the children of some families called the children of others, American hogs, and everyone felt as if he were brandishing his hard-earned civil rights when he shouted epithets at people who disagreed with him.

Some people in Mount Hollow thought that it would give the town real prestige if they could persuade Stephen Phelps to announce himself as Whig candidate for representative to the Nineteenth general assembly. But Stephen hung back because he was not certain he could be elected, and he refused to run the risk of a defeat.

"The times are too crazy to predict anything," he said to Amoret. "I'm going to stay out of that current, because God knows where it will wash. Slavery's too dangerous an issue for me to want to be mixed up in. No matter how any question starts, it splits against the line of slavery."

The truth was that he half-believed in slavery, so long as it could be kept within its own sacred precincts, and also that "north of thirty degrees, thirty minutes north latitude, slavery and involuntary servitude was forever prohibited."

"It's silly and dishonest to pretend that it is a matter of right or wrong," he said privately. "It's a question of expedi-

ency . . . fitting the best circumstances to the existing needs. No use moralizing about the thing. The fact is, the Northern workmen don't want the Southern negroes as competitors in free labor. But it sounds a lot better to pretend the blacks ought to be freed as children of God."

Amoret listened to such disillusioned cynicism in silence. Once she would have been grieved about his cheerful repudiation of anything that was idealistic in men's aims; at a later time she would have tried to explain her own viewpoint to him. But now she only listened, and let him talk his heresies, knowing there was nothing in them that could contaminate the truth.

It was as Mr. Lincoln himself had said, "God in His own good time will find a way to rid the nation of its curse, but emancipation is a grave question which Divine Wisdom only can solve." There would be talk and bitterness and even bloodshed. But God would change what needed to be changed, when enough right-thinking people had turned their thoughts from selfishness to principle. That is how events must happen. People must change their thoughts. Then must follow a grinding and shifting of situations. And finally the new circumstance emerges into visibility.

Afterwards everyone has an explanation of how it has come about; the base minds give their ignoble explanations; the high-minded see it as a triumph of idealism. An event happens; it mirrors itself in a million private meanings in each man's mind. It will be this way always. . . .

(4)

Under everything Stephen did these days, he had a worrying sorrow. Seemed as if there never was a time in his life, he thought wearily, when there was not some burr or nettle biting into his flesh. He had lived his life with as proud an exterior as possible; that was part of a man's dignity and duty. Nobody had guessed how much of his life he had spent in mental misery, because from the outside it had looked like a prospering and rather fortunate existence. Even the adversity which had threatened it so acutely at the very beginning of his marriage, had finally been conquered. But always, unseen

by anyone but himself, there had been first one agony and then another.

The latest current one concerned his son Toby. By the time little Tobias had learned to talk well, with a larger vocabulary than anyone could account for, he had developed a painful stammering. This grew worse from week to week, and it broke Stephen's heart to hear his son patiently making himself ridiculous while he tried to get out a single thread of sentence instead of a tangled skein of repeated syllables. He could not sleep at night for worrying about it.

"I blame myself for it," he said.

"Oh, darling, that's absurd," Amoret tried to tell him. "How could it possibly be your fault?"

"I shouted at him when he was such a baby and wouldn't talk the way I wanted him to. I kept at him over and over. It's made some derangement in his speech. It's my curse of vanity . . . that old vanity of mine . . . and now it's going to ruin my child's life, and shame me all the rest of my days."

"It won't ruin his life," Amoret said. "You let him alone, Stephen. You do your work and let him do his, and forget about it."

"His work? What are you talking about? He's still only a baby."

"His work is learning," she said. "There's something in this that he must learn."

"I can't understand how you can be such an unfeeling mother!" he cried. "You don't seem to realize what this will mean . . ."

"I realize," she said calmly. "You just let the child alone." She shut her lips as she always did now before she said the rest of the sentence. For the rest of the sentence was that faith in God which was bone of every thought she had, but which she must keep hidden as bones are kept.

When she and the child were alone, he talked much more freely than at other times. When there was anyone else present, his little face contorted with the earnestness of his effort, and the stumbling and repeating was almost more than anyone could listen to without laughing from sheer pity and nervousness. The child, young as he was, seemed determined to overcome the faltering impediment. He spared himself not at all, as some children might have. When he had something

to say, he floundered ahead through the difficulty until he was purple in the face. It was as if he understood that he must not give in to his affliction, that he must somehow master it.

"Point to what you want, son," Stephen would cry in agony, when the asking became too painful. But the little boy would shake his head and keep trying until he had finished the sentence.

"Take all the time you want, dear," Amoret would say. "There's no hurry. Talk as slowly as you please."

In spite of the stammering, he was a noticeably cheerful and pleasant child, with a lively sense of humor and a quick friendliness.

Opal said to her husband, "It jest tears my heart out to hear that little sweet thing trying to talk. I jest wish there was some kind of patent medicine the doctor could give fer stuttering."

"There is," Joel said. "Only it doesn't come in bottles."

"Don't?"

"It's confidence and love."

"Well, he's certainly got that all right. Miz Phelps . . . and Mr. Phelps, too, jest love him to distraction. If anything, they love him too much."

Once when the little boy went down the hill to play with Tom Larsen's son and the Knight children, Amoret overheard a horrible scene. The bigger children had formed a ring about little Toby and were dancing up and down, chanting:

"St-st-st-stammer tongue

Hiccough, she-cup, guts and lung."

The child, stricken and scarlet, was standing in the center with his head drooping in shame. She leaped up from her desk to run down to his rescue, hatred and indignation flaming in her against the symbolic cruelty of children. Then she stopped short, and dug her nails into her palms. "Father, these are Your children," she cried in her heart. "You teach all of them what they must learn. And You forgive them for hurting my little Toby. Don't let them hurt him too much . . . just enough so *he* will never want to hurt anything, Father."

Then it seemed as if the angel of forgiveness which was in her heart ran out from her, faster than her own feet would

have carried her, and entered into the heart of one of the taunters. She heard it happening and held her breath to listen.

The Larsen child cried, "You stop it, you young'uns! Nobody can make fun of Toby any more. He can talk any way he wants to, and nobody can imitate him any more. You hear me!" He stamped his foot for emphasis.

The children fell back in momentary guilt, then one of the older children, Ollie Knight, red-faced and belligerent, said, "Aw, shucks, we will, too!" And he began to shout:

*"St-st-st-stammer-tongue
He-cup-she-cup guts . . ."*

but he never got out the "lung," for all the rest of the children had pounced upon him and had dragged him into the dust, and were cramming his words back down his throat.

All but Toby. Toby, small as he was, was trying to protect the biggest of the bullies from the crowd.

That night when she put him to bed, Amoret attempted to speak of what she had seen, but the little boy was too shy and too much moved by the shame of his affliction to want her words.

"Learn it quickly, darling," she said, "so that you can soon be over it. God has work for you to do when you're a man. You must know how to sympathize with the mocked one. You must know how he feels. . . ."

"Why, mother?" he murmured, not meeting her eyes, torturing his forefinger into a buttonhole of her skirt.

"So that you can help him wherever you find him. So you can run to help him when anyone is jeering at him."

He nodded his head slowly, still with his eyes downcast in shame and sadness. But she saw that the sadness was as much for those others as for himself.

"There are cruel things in the world which have to be changed," she said.

"Like beating horses, the way Abner Popel did . . . ?"

"Yes, and worse things. Slaves, darling, whipped when they fall down exhausted . . . and white people made into animals because they are poor . . . and little children sick and ignorant. I don't know what you work will be, Toby, but I do know this; it will be some work to make suffering less."

The child was too young to grasp fully what she meant, but he leaned against her knees and looked up into her face with his sweet grave smile and patted her hand while she talked, forgetting himself now.

When she finished, he said, "Making fun of other people is like being sick. I didn't want Ollie to feel sick the way he did, mother. His eyes looked sick when he was singing that song at me."

Seeing that already he had gone up into the mount where he could forgive his persecutors and want to spare them their self-inflicted wounds, she said to him with all confidence, "You will talk easily some day, Tobias. You will have things to say that will shine out of you." She held his strong homely little face against her breast a moment. "But never forget what it feels like not to be able to talk plain."

Stephen felt a double humiliation in his son's affliction. He had a superstitious abhorrence of it, as if it were some shameful confession which couldn't be hidden, as if it were connected in some mystical way with his own physical handicap. "A handsome looking family we've become!" he said once scornfully as the three of them were walking along Mount Hollow's main street, after Toby had just come through a losing battle with some consonants. "Look at us!" He pointed indignantly to their grouped shadow walking beside them, his own shadow leaping and lunging as the lamed foot necessitated. "We look like the battered, bedeviled sons of the wilderness that we are! We used to be spotless and elegant, and now look at us! My son sputtering and stuttering like an imbecile, and I hippety-hopping like a fox that caught himself in a trap!"

"Stephen, you torture yourself," she said. "The people who loved you before love you even more now. Lameness is an opportunity, if you only recognize it."

"Yes," he said bitterly, "an opportunity to have yokels feel sorry for me!"

"If you only knew it, there is nothing so winsome as a handicap gallantly borne," she said sternly. "You'll see what a fine man it will make of your son. He'll have an understanding and a sympathy that nothing else could ever give him. You mark what I tell you."

But he wasn't listening to this. He was thinking angrily

about his own lameness, and the mortification it was to him. "I suppose in a way these poor dirty wretches do like me better this way, because now they can pity me," he said. "Poor Mr. Phelps . . . all he brought back from California was a crippled hoof.' Sixty million dollars worth of gold in one year was what other people found in California. But all I found was starving to death and being crippled for life." He lurched along with exaggerated limping, angry at himself, hence at everything else. "Well, I never wanted their love, and I certainly don't want their pity."

"You'll have neither, if you don't learn to be worthy of it," she said with a rare lacing of tartness in her voice.

But she was sorry the moment she had said it, for she knew that under all the cruel complaining he did about his son's stammering, lay heartbroken suffering because the child was afflicted, and he knew of no way to help it.

He heard of a hypnotist in Springfield, who claimed he could heal fits, warts, worms, stammering, and bed-wetting by putting his patient in a trance and then commanding the difficulty to depart. Very furtively, not even telling Amoret, he took little Toby over to Springfield and sat through half of the treatment. Then, when he could no longer endure the grimy fingernails of the manipulator massaging the clean blond skull of his son, he seized the child, threw the silver money for the fee on the table and took the little boy out into the decent afternoon air.

He talked to Joel Adams, and Joel said, "Stephen, you've got to think about other things and let the child alone. He's still only four years old. Children outgrow all kinds of troubles like this. Just enjoy him, and let him see how much you love him and how proud you are of him."

"Proud!" he cried, through his set teeth. "You don't know what it's like . . . none of you seem to realize this is my *son*, and I wanted to make a statesman of him . . ."

Joel looked at him with undisguised pity now. "Stephen, you've got a lot to learn even yet. God's going to make out of Tobias what He wants him to be. You just settle down and watch it happen. Besides . . ."

"Besides what?" he muttered, controlling his rage.

"Tobias doesn't stammer when he is alone with Mrs. Phelps." That infuriated him so much that he walked out of the preacher's house and banged the door.

"Ignorant fools," he said. "I'm going to cure him of stammering if I have to . . ." He almost had said "take him back East to do it." But his mind stopped before it uttered those words, for there was still remorse and grief in them.

So these years drew to their close, and it was curious that whenever she thought of them, Amoret called them to herself the happiest years of her life. The words always surprised her, for judged from the outside there was much in them to mar their beauty. Yet beneath, in their very heartbeat was a rhythm and a poetry of meaning that no events could conceal. She had her last child now, her own Tobias. And his destiny was plain and sure before her.

Whatever he needed to know to prepare him for his work, God was going to teach him, and teach him early. He would know how to be stronger than any taunting, and tender as only the intimacy with pain can teach tenderness. He was endearingly homely so that all who looked at him would want to reassure him. Because of the light shining in him and the simplicity of the lamp bearing that light, he would always find an open, welcoming way before him. It was an earthenware lamp and not a rich silver one that bore the light, so men would value him not for the lamp but for the light. He would know the royal way of meekness, the outstretched hand of gratitude, for he had stamped upon him the winsome humility of homeliness.

The man and the boy each had a physical shame to bear. Because of his own suffering, the child lightened the load of anyone he saw with a weight upon him; but for the same reason, the man seemed to take savage delight in inflicting new discomfort on others, as if that would somehow equalize the distance between himself and them. The man lashed out in anger and irritableness at any reminder that there was pain in the world to be borne; the little Toby grew gentle and quick to watch for a way to help any small hurt thing that passed his gaze. Quite simply and with neither of them defining it or even realizing it, one illustrated the curse of affliction, and one was the walking sight of its blessing.

In a wordless, reverent way Amoret read what was written in her son. Like many of the divine men who come into this world to assuage its griefs, he was marked by the image of his own cross upon his body. If he were to reach the fullness of the stature of himself, he would have to die upon that

cross and then would have to rise from that dying with a self new-born. It were well that this crucifixion should happen early, so that the self would not engage overlong in the tragedy before it rose from the tomb of itself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Release came with unexpected suddenness. When once it was realized, Amoret saw it was as inevitable as spring.

Stephen had waked up in an unusually jovial mood that August morning. He had some business to transact over in the next township, and when they had gone to bed the night before he had said he wanted to start early and be back in time for supper. She heard him whistling under his breath as he hurried about in his own dressingroom, and in her half-sleep she thought, "He is really happiest when neither Toby nor I are there to remind him. He's happiest when he can play his little games all by himself. When he looks at us, he remembers that they're not true." She heard him going down the stairs in a few moments, and she leaped out of bed almost guiltily.

"I mustn't leave Toby too long with him alone," she was thinking. "The child seems to get on his nerves so badly . . ."

Then from below, she heard the monotonous twang of Annie Crow telling him some household news. His voice every now and then hammered down a good male sentence to give her wobbly structure some shape. Women would always love Stephen with a variety of fascination and interest, custom-made for each of them. Even Annie Crow, who thoroughly disapproved of him, couldn't help bridling with piqued pertness whenever she was alone with him.

Annie Crow's own diagnosis of him was quite an original one. "Only trouble with him," she used to say to herself, "he's married to a woman who's too good for him. Mate him up to just the ordinary, stupid little wife, and he'd be quite a big toad. Turns a vain man kind of sour to have to be around a woman who's smarter than he is." She understood both of these people like a book, she often told herself in solemn misrepresentation, since book reading was not one of her accomplishments.

She saw Stephen seating himself at the dining room table and looking around very pleasedly at the sunny room, and she knew exactly how he was feeling. He liked lots of sun

with his breakfast, he always told her, so in the morning the first thing she did when she came down was to push back the ruffled curtains and let the sun come in, and never mind what it did to the carpet. She had to admit that morning sun made all the silver in the room twinkle and gleam, and the glassware wink with rainbows. Sunlight for breakfast, candlelight for dinner, Mr. Phelps said.

He also liked to have growing plants in the dining room, and the bay window was banked with Annie's own ferns and geraniums and even a bow-legged stiff rubber plant with a long coral-sheathed scroll of leaf tightly rolled at the top. Annie polished this monstrosity once a week with castor oil, until the leaves glowed like dark green glass in which you could see yourself mirrored in an elongated reflection that made your face pear-shaped like a drop off the end of an icicle. Miz Phelps didn't pay much attention to things like the bay window full of house plants. But Mr. Phelps enjoyed it, and that made it worth while.

He was sitting quietly at the table, but she sensed suddenly that the mood in the dining room had changed, and she looked in through the pantry door to see what had come over him. His head was sunk on his chest, and he was looking out of the tops of his eyes in a moody stare, and she knew with swift understanding that he was displeased, because down below the ample roll of the hill with all his fine landscaping and folderol on it, were the growing, sprawling buildings of the mill, and beyond that the hideous bare brickyard. Some people said the mill was getting so big that it was making the house a little ridiculous, like a dressed-up woman in ostrich plumes and ruffles standing behind the counter of a general store. But that was just plain nonsense. Because if it hadn't been for the fine big mill and the brickyard, there wouldn't have been a house.

And such a house, too. Still the most elegant one in three counties. But a kind of funny thing had happened in that house. It seemed sometimes now as if it belonged more to Mr. Phelps than it did to Miz Phelps. Seemed as if they had changed places in some ways. The mill was more hers and the house was more his. And you couldn't say quite when that had come about.

That might have been the very thing that Mr. Phelps himself was thinking about as he sat there with his head sunk on

his chest and his eyes moody and unhappy, looking out the window. For suddenly he jumped up from his place at the table and went around and sat down with his back turned to that window. He was facing the western view now, the one that looked out across to Mr. Adams' old cabin. In that window hung Miz Phelps' little canary bird, singing and jumping about in the crazy, early-morning way a canary does. Mr. Phelps got up from his chair again and went over to the bird, and poked his finger through the gold bars and whistled to it.

"That's right, old chap," he said, "you and I both prefer to look out on the pleasant side of life."

So she had been right after all, Annie Crow thought complacently. She felt sorry for him sometimes. With all he was so high and mighty, and lost his temper so easy, and expected everything to be so perfect, and got so mad when it wasn't . . . there was something kind of pitiful about him. It was as if he had something aching inside himself that kept him so uncomfortable that he simply had to find something outside to complain about.

Maybe it was his foot, she thought, wishing it were as simple as that. For she knew what it was. More than anything else, she knew that somehow, for all he made so many speeches about it, he never had really forgiven his wife for getting along so well without him while he was gone. He'd have liked it better if, with all the sorrow and loss she'd had, Miz Phelps had gone into a decline the way some women would have. He'd have liked everything to kind of run down hill until he came home and took charge of things. And then, of course, there was the children. Whether you liked Mr. Phelps or not, you had to admit he had been proud of his two first children. He never mentioned them since he had come back from California, but that loss must have hurt more than his pride. That must have hurt his conscience.

For all he had everything in the world that was lucky and fortunate, she doubted very much if anybody would want to change places with Mr. Phelps. If they knew all about it, that is.

Little Toby came running into the room now, and when he saw his father he hesitated, and would have turned and gone back out. But it was too late.

"Come in, son, come in," Mr. Phelps said with impatient cheerfulness. "Isn't often you and I have a chance to . . ."

"Wh . . . wh . . . where's mother?" the little boy said, blowing out his words in that frightened uncomfortable way which affected him worse when he was alone with his father.

A dark wave of distaste swept over Stephen's face. It did no good to speak to the child about his stammering. So instead he scolded about his manners.

"'Good morning, father. Where's mother?'" Stephen corrected him in a rasping, intolerant voice.

The child slid into his chair, his eyes stationary on his father's face, while the rest of his little body wiggled uncomfortably. "G . . . g . . . good morning, father," he mumbled.

"Your mother is having her beauty sleep," Stephen said with persistent joviality.

"Wh . . . what's beauty sleep?"

"An extra sleep in the morning to make women more beautiful and charming for their husbands," Stephen said. "A true woman's first concern, my son, is to be charming to her husband."

"She doesn't need any b . . . b . . . beauty sleep," Toby said. "She's pretty already."

Amoret then appeared at the door, and the moment Annie Crow saw her she knew that her appearance was going to annoy her husband. Mr. Phelps couldn't bear to have her come to the breakfast table wearing her plain working dress. He liked ruffles as well as sunshine with his breakfast. Miz Phelps knew that, too, and usually she came down dressed as if she were going to do nothing all day but buff her nails and eat chocolate drops. But today she probably was very busy at the mill or the brickyard.

"Who is it that is pretty already?" Miz Phelps said.

The little boy jumped up from his place and ran around the table to her and threw his arms around her knees. "You are, mother," he said. "You are." Mrs. Phelps laughed and patted his face and then bent down to kiss him. Mr. Phelps got up from the table and pulled back her chair ceremoniously.

"She would be, son, if she came to the table properly dressed," he said lightly.

Amoret looked apologetically at her husband, but he would not quite meet her eyes. "I'm sorry, darling," she said, "I should have put on my lovely challis breakfast gown you

brought me from Chicago. But I didn't think you'd notice this morning. There's so much to do at the mill . . ."

"There's always so much to do, my dear," Stephen said. "You have no time really to be a woman."

"Please, Stephen . . ." she said, glancing at the little boy.

But Toby's head was bent over his bowl of mush, and he didn't appear to be hearing, although Annie Crow knew that he was hearing and understanding perfectly, since he was a child who didn't miss anything. Mr. Phelps with a brush of his hand dismissed the subject.

"Probably it's my fault. As everything else is."

But Amoret couldn't let it go this way. "Stephen, darling," she said, "you know I went on helping you in the business because you wanted me to. You know when Toby was born I wanted to leave all that, and you felt it was because I loved the child more than you . . ."

"We don't have to go into all that," he said rudely. "I only want you to do what you please."

"You know what that is," she said earnestly. "I only want to please you, Stephen."

"Naturally . . . Naturally," he said coldly.

Annie Crow wanted to say, "Stop trying to please him, ma'am! You can't do it. Nothing can please a man who's displeased with himself."

Little Toby had finished his breakfast, and was eager to be out of the house, as he almost always was when his father was there, making the house seem turgid with emotion and criticism and dissatisfaction. He ran across the brickyard now where the wagons were loading, and went into the little office building. His mother had given him a desk here on his fifth birthday. It was only make-believe, but he loved sitting at his desk while she worked at hers. His father thought it was pretty silly to let a little boy play in the office. You wouldn't have caught him having any toys in the mill office!

But the brickyard was different. The brick business had been made out of something apart from business. It belonged to everybody, mother said. It had been given to them by God. Same way the earth was given. It belonged to children as well as grownups.

Over his mother's desk hung a calendar. It was beautiful. It had a picture of a big Saint Bernard dog on it, and a little girl was lying asleep under the dog's big paw. Toby was learning his numbers from the calendar. Up in one corner it

said 1860, and down below was each day of the month in a little cage by itself. Today, he saw, was August 14. He was learning his numbers from the calendar, and he was learning to read from his grandfather's Bible, which lay as always on the right hand corner of his mother's desk. That big old Bible from which everything they knew had been built . . . this country, this state, this town of Mount Hollow, this brick-yard. His imagination focused down explicitly and finally reached the exquisite immediateness of himself. "And even me," he said to himself, enumerating the achievements of that Bible.

He sat down at his own desk then and began pushing papers about as his mother usually did when she commenced to work. Then he remembered that this was not an accurate make-believe of the way she began her day. So he bowed his head and folded his hands. Sometimes you spoke to God in a nice proper prayer and sometimes you just talked with Him as you would with your own mother. Sometimes you said, "God, *please* untie that little string around my tongue." But that you usually said in silence in your heart, so that if God wasn't ready to do it yet, He wouldn't be embarrassed by having anyone overhear your asking Him.

This morning he said a real prayer. One that Mr. Adams had taught him. He said, "Father, I am Your child. And this is Your day. Let us both fill each other with Your good. Amen."

He liked that prayer. He always saw it as two beautiful urn-shaped bottles like the ones in the apothecary shop down on Main Street. One was filled with glowing ruby color . . . that bottle was himself. The other was a marvelous blue . . . that was the day. He saw himself pouring good into the day; then he saw the day pouring good into him. He liked the vision very much. He realized now there was someone else in the office. He turned around in his chair and looked over his shoulder, and there standing in the door was his mother.

"Toby, it's fun to make-believe," his mother said.

"Yes, mother."

"But this one moment is not play, you know."

"I know, mother," he said gruffly. Then, a few steps behind his mother, he saw that his father was standing, and from his father's face he knew he was terribly cross. He knew why he was cross, of course. Because of the prayer.

But much as the prayer annoyed Stephen, what irritated

him most of all was that the child had said the prayer without the slightest trace of stammering. Sometimes he felt as if the little boy's disgusting impediment was only some affectation put on to annoy his parent. There he was speaking to God, presumably, and speaking as plainly as anyone could speak.

"My God!" Stephen said to himself, "she's going to make such a mealy-mouth of him that he won't know how to talk to men. He'll have to carry on all his conversations with God!"

Aloud he said to Amoret, "Mrs. Phelps, you're making an unbearable prig of that child."

She turned and looked at him a long moment, and then she smiled with understanding and good humor. But when she spoke, her voice was completely firm and purposeful.

"He is my son, Stephen," she said. "Of the three children I have borne, this one is my son. The other two were sent away so they wouldn't be ashamed of their mother, who is a prig . . . But if you are ashamed of my son . . ." She knew she was saying something as cruel as truth itself. "I gave you your way with the first two. I'm going to have my way with Toby."

Her words hurt him so deeply that all he could do was to blot them completely from the moment and from memory. He took her by the shoulders, and for a minute it looked as if he were going to shake her in impotent anger. But instead of anger, he used the half-brother of anger, which is passion. He took her face in his hands and bent back her head and closed his lips over her mouth with merciless, impersonal lust.

"You are a prig *and* a businessman," he said huskily, when he was ready to release her lips. "What a combination, Amoret! I wish you were all prig . . . and all businessman. Then I could have forgotten you . . . I could have got you out of my blood long ago."

It was the first time he had ever said such a brutal and violent thing to her, but now that the first words were said, others came tumbling out. "I hate all that in you . . . I wish you looked the way you are, inside. I wish you were starched outside the way you are inside. But no . . . you're soft and lovely. Your lips are like dew. And fire. But you're cold inside. You're nothing but goodness. Goodness and praying. I hate all that . . ." Shamefacedly he dropped his hands from her shoulders and turned away, and for a terrible moment she thought he was going to cry before his son.

"All what?"

"All that goodness. All that thinking about . . . God." In his words rankled the original resentment. And to that had been added the long-growing jealousy because she had made herself a life in spite of him.

"Why should you hate it, Stephen?" she asked imploringly.

"Because it has shut me out," he said with a hopeless gesture. "I can see it in you . . . don't think I can't see it. I've tried to reach it. I've tried to come in there with you. I loathe it, because there's no place for me in it. It shuts me out of you."

"You shut yourself out. I tried to bring you in."

They had both forgotten the child now, because for the first time in their lives, with all the disguises stripped away, they were looking at that old enmity between them, this deeply intimate enmity.

"It's done nothing but separate us," Stephen cried angrily. "And that Book . . . I wish I had thrown it off the boat as I wanted to. The first morning I caught you reading it . . . I knew then . . . I told you you looked like a woman in love . . ."

"Stephen, please . . ."

But he was pouring forth anger that had long been brewing. "It's brought us nothing but trouble." He seized the Book from her desk, and looked at it with hatred. "It's made me a laughingstock. It's made you stronger every day . . . while I've become . . . *I hate it.*" He held it open in his shaking hands, as if he would tear it apart, as if it were some living thing that he would dismember and kill. Amoret, too horrified to speak, stood helpless. But Toby wasn't helpless. He leaped out of his chair, and threw himself, kicking and shouting, against his father.

"I hate you!" he cried. "When I grow up, I'm going to kill you."

The child, impotent in baby rage, was clawing at the big man like a small wild animal. His breath was coming in tearing gasps between his little teeth, and the man could only drop back and look at him in amazement. That gentle, soft-spoken child who knew only how to talk to God was shouting masculine rage at something four times his size! And was shouting it in clear, unstammering syllables! In an instant Stephen burst out laughing with relief and pleasure. And yes, with pride, because this son of his was going to be a fighter.

But Amoret stepped over and put her hand on the little boy. He was quiet instantly. His face was convulsed with emotion. There was silence in the room now, a terrible contrasting silence. Amoret spoke in a very matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"Toby, you go up to the house," she said, "and ask Annie Crow to give you the yellow soap."

The little boy looked up at her, then his face relaxed.

"You'll apologize to your father," Amoret said sternly.

Before his eyes, Stephen saw that the whole dangerous primitive occurrence, which had had in it the seeds of murder itself, had been reduced to the safe size of an everyday, little-boy naughtiness.

"Excuse me," he said to his father. "I have to sc . . . sc . . . scrub my mouth out, sir."

He left the room in silence, and in a few minutes they could see him from the window, running pellmell across the brickyard toward the house. Stephen put out his arms imploringly toward his wife, asking her to reduce the horror for him also, as she had reduced it for his son.

"I'll apologize now," he said with his most winning smile. "I shouldn't have lost my temper before the boy, Amoret."

But she was not even listening to what he was saying. A cold calm look had come into her eyes.

"Stephen, I'm going to leave you," she said. The words surprised them both. The moment she said them, she realized it was the sober truth. It was not a threat, a woman's whim. It was inflexible intention, spoken not out of her, but out of the necessity of the circumstance.

"Amoret, please . . . I didn't mean all that. If only . . ." he faltered brokenly.

"For everybody's sake. For Toby's. And mine. And yours." She looked at her desk and fumbled a moment with some papers in a helpless indecision. Then she pushed them into a neat pile.

"You can run this business any way you want to. I'll take just enough money for Toby and me to start again."

"You're out of your mind," he said. "You're only saying it."

"No. I mean it."

"But you can't get along alone."

Her eyes were still on Stephen's face, but her hand had reached out to the familiar spot on her desk and had picked

up Tobias' old Book which Stephen had dropped a moment before.

"We won't be alone," she said. She went out the door and across the yard and up the hill to the house.

He said to himself, "I can't even run after her." He was employing his self-pity quickly to ameliorate the intensity of the moment. "I'm not going to let her hear me hippety-hopping behind her like a lame fox. I'll not let her be sorry for me . . ."

He scuffed the back of his hand across his eyes, and the fact that he was trembling in every limb only added to his self-pity. "I'll wait until she's in her bedroom. Then I'll go up and . . ."

But on second thought he decided that the best way to handle the whole thing was to assume that her words had been what his were, only the hot-headed utterances of a family quarrel. Without consequence. He would do exactly as he had intended. Go over to Landsville today and take care of his business. He would buy something for her and a gift for the boy. He would come home tonight, and be his most gracious self to them both. Of course she would forgive him. And when they had entered that world of their own tonight, he would say . . .

But he must not let such scenes continue. He must somehow get at this awful enmity between them. He would lose her this way, as surely as if she really had left him. He could not bear to lose her. He loved her now more passionately than he had loved her twenty years ago when he was a boy. What he had said to her once was true; there was between them some bond of passion, some rhyming of body, which was rare in this world. He never had found it with anyone else . . . and never could. She was an unsolved riddle to him. An amorous saint. If only he could lose the saint and keep the lover . . .

(2)

Annie Crow packed tears with the luggage. Not tears for the two who were leaving, but tears for herself who was being left behind. Miz Phelps said she must take care of Mr. Phelps. And she had added with logic that baffled Annie

Crow, "I can do my own work only if I know my husband is being cared for. Now promise me, Annie."

Having made up her mind that she must leave, Amoret hesitated not a moment. If it were to be done, it must be done today. There would be no bickering and arguing and compromising about it. She had received her "orders"; she would act upon them instantly. While Annie was getting their clothes packed, Amoret drove down to Mount Hollow to get some cash from Mr. Twicker for the trip.

But her principal reason for going to Mount Hollow was to tell Joel Adams what she had decided to do. As she was driving along, she remembered the Shunammite woman who had the great trusting friendship with Elisha, the man of God. The Shunammite's son had lain dead in her house, and she had told no one, but had closed the door and had gone out to meet the man of God who was on his way to the village. From a long way off the prophet had seen her, so he sent his servant ahead to ask, "Is it well with you?"

She said, "It is well."

"Is it well with the child?"

"It is well with the child," she had said. And all the time her little boy was lying dead in the room.

When she came to the man of God, he, too, asked her, "Is it well?" She threw herself down on the ground and grasped his feet, but could not speak to him. She could not tell him what had happened, so he had to guess. But they had gone on to her house, and the man of God had taken up the child and had restored life to his body.

Amoret understood all this. In a symbolic way, it had happened to her. The Shunammite's love must have been somewhat like her own love of Joel Adams . . . Amoret, too, had come to a good man when her very life was lying dead in her empty house. When her pledge and purpose were lying dead within her. Joel had turned his back upon the earthly love she was offering him in despair and loneliness, and had laid his hands upon her own dead vision and had brought it back to life.

Afterwards, she had run to his half-shut door to tell him that he had given her back her children. He had not done that, of course; it was not in his power to do that. But he had done something even greater in the end. He had given her herself and this child who was the very meaning of her life.

He had brought to life her truest son, which was her own purpose animated by the understanding child who could live that vision with her. It had been in her a quiet, invisible miracle, as true as that the Shunammite had known.

There are many kinds of death, she thought now; there is the swift one that kills the body, as her first children had been killed; but there is also the slower, insidious, placating deadness which annihilates the spirit in man. Chronic death, which would dull the very spark God has created in man with the ashes man has created in himself. She had helplessly watched that spark being snuffed out in Stephen. And now this walking death had finally taken her husband from her, and buried him in worldliness. So today there was still a room in her house in which death lay, with the door closed upon it.

Why had she never been able to lay this grief at some Elisha's feet, and mutely cry for that raising from the dead? She had tried, and Joel had tried. But no man of God seemed big enough. Perhaps it was a miracle too big for any man to perform. Perhaps it was a miracle belonging only to God Himself.

She was at Joel Adams' gate, and for some whimsical woman's reason, she did not go up to the front door, but, just as she had that other night, she went around through his garden, an August garden now bright and warm and humming with bees drowsy with pollen. She went up to the side door as she had that night, knowing the door would not be opened as it had been then. For the man within and the woman without were both new people, born out of that long-past night.

She would always remember the other opening of that door as if it were one strayed scene from a life which she had not been permitted to live. She thought for a moment about the nature of that life; she closed her eyes and felt its texture. It would have been willful . . . so it would have been tragic. It would have defied everything except itself, so it would have been doomed to ultimate despair. But it had not been allowed to happen. From the unpermitted sad magnificence of defeat, she had retained this one small relic, the opening of the door. That would stay intact and perfect in her memory, the lone souvenir of a life un-lived.

She thought, "It will probably be Opal who answers this knock. And that will be just as good as Joell" It measured the peace in her heart that she should be so utterly sincere in

thinking this. For Opal was part of her Shunammite miracle. Such things as this were not of this world. They could not quite be understood by the world, and it did not matter whether or not the world ever did understand.

But it was Joel who drew her into the house. The moment he saw her he said, "Amoret . . . something has happened."

"Yes. I've decided to go away, Joel. I've decided to take Toby away." She told him what had happened, and he stood looking at her with the same understanding in his eyes which must have been in Elisha's eyes when he saw the woman with the dead child.

"I can't let these things happen to Toby," she said. "He's the important thing."

His dark face was full of an almost Madonna-like tenderness under the hair which was all white now. His face and the moment were full of contradictions, and that, too, seemed the very nature of the two worlds, one waiting for the other to yield.

"There's only one thing," she said after a silence. "I wanted to bring the boy up near you, Joel."

"You've grown long past me, ma'am," he said. "You don't need me any more, Amoret. You're ready for the child by yourself. I only know a certain much. He can take you on from there, and you can take him on. You won't need anybody, except what you have."

Before noon she and the boy were on their way. They would take with them only hand luggage, and Annie Crow would send along their trunks after they had written back to tell her where they were going to settle. They would stay with Harriet Phelps at first, but later they would go on and make their own place. The future was a mist before them, but Amoret knew that every step would emerge solidly before her foot. It had been so ever since she had begun to trust God and to become so well-acquainted with Him that she found Him in all ways and on every side, waiting in all love and kindness and wisdom. Somewhere in the Book it said, "Am I a God at hand, and not a God afar off?" You could trust God in the far-off space and time as surely as you could trust what was at hand. She had no fears about it.

All she asked was a quiet place where she and Toby could work and grow, and bring the rich wealth which they had within them into fulfillment of everyday living. She knew

how to live abundantly, and to bring life to those around her, to be one with them, as all the world is one.

The railroad was not yet finished to Mount Hollow. The train for the East would leave Springfield early tomorrow morning, and they would be on it, headed for new adventures. This was a far different country from the one Amoret had passed years ago on that first twilight journey in the stage. It had an open, wide, expansive look upon it. There were farms, still not always beautiful or comfortable. But in all of them were the beginnings of comfort, and even of beauty. There were fields of corn singing to themselves under the ripening sun; there were oceans of rolling pastureland beyond the motionless march of the orchards, bent now under their burdens of fruit. It was a richly giving country, and she loved it as she loved her own children. They would come back to it some day. The land would bring them back. But now, for this moment, they must find their way into something new. The little boy sitting beside her was looking up into her face trying to read what she was thinking.

"Tell me about how you came out here, mother," he said. So she told him once again about the canal boats and the Portage Railway and about drinking from the streams, one running east and one running west at the top of the mountain. Then she said to him:

"I thought about you, Toby, on that trip. I thought about you, and you were exactly as you are now. I knew exactly what kind of a little boy I wanted, and you are he."

He was enormously pleased with this, so pleased that he wanted to give her back a handful of the same joy. "I thought about you, too," he said, snuggling up to her.

"You weren't born," she reminded him, laughing and tweaking his blond cowlick.

"I thought about you anyway," he insisted shyly, "wherever I was when I wasn't born, I thought about you. I knew exactly the kind of mother I wanted to have." He looked up at her mischievously, and she thought, "He has Stephen's fun in him. That will help."

"Where will we live, mother?"

"We'll see. We'll live where there is a good school. You'll have work to do when you're a man, so you must learn now."

"I know quite a lot already," he said with serious modesty.

The carriage was jogging along with their luggage rattling

in the rear. The rolling country began to be more settled as they approached Springfield. It was late afternoon and long shadows lay along the ground; every fence-post had a purple arrow pointing from it, due east.

"Everything is pointing," Toby said, as if this were a somehow magical discovery. "Will we get on the steam cars to-night, mother?"

"No, we'll sleep in a hotel."

"Will it be fun? Will I tell my little boys about it when I'm big and have some?"

"I hope so. It will be an adventure when you tell them. You can say you and your mother talked about them."

"Yes . . . the way you thought about me, when you didn't have *me* yet!" He was delighted with this, as children always are in the continuity which keeps the pattern endlessly weaving, past shuttling into present, and present into future.

The houses which used to be located on the edge of town were now well in toward the city, and new streets had invaded the cornfields, for Springfield was growing rapidly. A pavement of wooden planks dignified the public square, and at this very moment, a new gas company was laying pipes through the streets so that some day the houses would have gas chandeliers like the ones Horace and Harriet had been so proud of back in Philadelphia. The tracks of the Great Western Railroad crossed tree-lined Washington Street, beside the church.

There seemed to be a great deal of activity in the town today, for everyone was hurrying along the boardwalks, and the streets seemed filled with carriages and horseback riders. As Amoret started on her way to the Square and the livery stable where she could dispose of her horse and carriage before buying the train ticket for tomorrow, they heard a burst of band music and the sound of applause.

"There must be a paradel!" little Toby cried. "Something must be happening, mother, and we're here to see it!"

The crowd seemed to be converging down Eighth Street, so Amoret drove old Ned into the swift-moving current and followed. She could see the big shadowy body of the crowd now, down at the corner of Jackson Street and Eighth. Toby was jumping up and down with excitement.

"Oh, mother . . . you told me we could see things . . . you told me . . .!"

There were floats made of flat bargelike wagons with gen-

tllemen and ladies standing together on them, waving banners and singing. There were carryalls filled with ladies in white dresses twirling gaily-ruffled parasols and waving handkerchiefs. A big square house at the corner of the two streets was the gathering place.

"It can't be just a party," Amoret said. "There are too many people."

The crowd had surged up to the very doorway of the house, and on the edges were flags and banners, and several glittering bands playing at once, not caring at all how their music clashed. Amoret and Toby climbed out of the carriage; she tied the horse to a hitching post, and they hurried across to the crowd, Toby tiptoeing with eagerness. The noise had suddenly subsided, for a tall bare-headed man in a white coat had opened the door and had come out of the house to stand on the stoop.

"Is that Abraham Lincoln?" she whispered to a man beside whom they were standing. He nodded, without letting his eyes leave the gaunt face.

"He's been nominated for President," the man said in a hushed voice. "Whole town wants to tell him we're right glad." Amoret was overcome with awe. She lifted Toby in her arms so he could see that face.

"You're looking at the man who's going to be our President, Toby," she whispered. "You're seeing history, son."

"What's history? It looks just like a man . . ."

"That's the way history looks . . . that's what history is. One man stepping ahead, and then the world following him."

Her eyes were misted with feeling. Already, only a few hours from her old life, she was beginning to find what she had come for, a glimpse of the bigness and the excitement of the world. This was no time for families to close their doors and quarrel. This was the time to open doors and help with the work that was to be done!

People said that simple man looking out on this crowd with brooding dark eyes was going to change the nature of their country with his bare hands and his bare words. He was beginning to talk now to his old neighbors, and they were hushed to listen. First of all, he said that he didn't want to make any real speech, and then he added with that lopsided wide grin of his, "But if it appears to be your wish to see me, it certainly is my wish to see all of you."

They laughed good-naturedly, but with a tremulous haze

of feeling over their laughter, and some of them called out, "That's what we want, Abe."

One old man said, "We want to keep our eye on you, and you keep your eye on us. That way we won't neither of us go wrong."

Then Lincoln began to speak with great earnestness. He said again how surprised he was . . . how grateful that the crowd was showing this feeling for him. "I am grateful because it is a tribute such as can be paid to no man as a man. It is the evidence that four years from this time, you will give a like manifestation to the next man who is a representative of the truth on the question which now agitates the public. And it is because you will then fight for this cause as you do now, or with even greater ardor than now, though I be dead and gone, that I most profoundly and sincerely thank you."

They were simple words, but they were not perfunctory. What he was expressing was a large truth. He was saying, just as Tobias had tried to say it, that men are only as important as the ideas that animate them. He was turning aside that neighborly homage which had come to him, and insisting that it be given to that larger thing, the conviction of truth which was picking him up and carrying him out of this safe little life into the turbulent conflict of the divided nation.

He was affirming exactly what Amoret herself was saying by this very leaving of that comfortable home of hers, for the sake of an idea and a purpose bigger than herself.

He had gone back into the house now, and some eager politician had taken his place and was shouting with mellow rhetoric. But the crowd was listening with only one ear, for the ringing, simple words were seeping through them and modulating into personal meaning for each of them.

"If anybody can stop this here country from splitting right in half, Abe kin do it," some of them were muttering.

Amoret slipped out of the throng now; she had heard what she had come to hear; there need be no more. She went swiftly back to the carriage and lifted Toby up to the seat, without a word. He saw she was deep in thought, and he, too, wrinkled his strong little face in imitation of hers. She drove along to the north side of the Square, where she knew the livery stable was.

"I want to leave them for the night," she said to the man in the deserted big barn.

Toby pulled at her skirt. "I thought we were going to sell old Ned, mother. And the carriage . . ."

"Not now . . . tomorrow. I don't want to think about business now, Toby." To the livery stableman she said, "We'll need a good rooming house for the night, my little boy and me."

"Mrs. Armitage's, ma'am . . . on Sixth Street. Nice place. Family place. Did you happen to hear the celebration in town?"

Amoret nodded, still deep in thought. But the stableman who had been unable to attend the gathering, wanted to talk. He had some rights, you could see him thinking . . .

"Terrible times we're living in, ma'am. Country's going to split in two, sure's you're a minute old. I say let 'em rip."

"Mr. Lincoln doesn't say that," Amoret said gently. "Mr. Lincoln quotes the Bible. He says, 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.'"

"Yep. I heerd the House Divided speech," he said, eager to establish his importance. "It was the first time he gave that speech a couple of years ago over in Bloomington. I've heard many a lawyer and politician and people like that talk about slavery, but ain't nobody ever spoke about it the way he did that time. Made chills run right up your backbone, ma'am, the quiet way he said, 'This here country can't exist half-slave, half-free.'"

Then he deflated his enthusiasm a little and added his own sentiments. "But what I say, ma'am, is if the country can't get along together, let 'em get along apart. It's just like a husband and wife who ain't getting along. Better off separated."

"No. Mr. Lincoln is right," Amoret said slowly. "God joined us to be one, and we must work out our destiny together."

(3)

Her own words left a curious echo ringing through her all that evening. She kept wondering why she had said them with such ardent conviction. She felt as if she were speaking with some huge authority, larger than her own . . . and as if she were talking about something besides the troubled question of the nation. She said her own words over to herself and

wondered where they had come from. "God joined us to be one, and we must work out our destiny together."

Throughout supper in the big friendly dining room at Mrs. Armitage's, she was quiet. Excitement ebbed and flowed around her, and her child sat wide-eyed and thrilled, listening. He had seen "history" today, and all this talk was probably part of it. He wondered sleepily what the word meant. As soon as supper was over they went back upstairs to the shabby ornate chamber, and Amoret quickly put her son in the big bed.

Toby was still excited and happy, but she herself was tired now and confused with the chaotic events of the day. How far away this morning seemed, when she had awakened hearing Stephen whistling to himself as he dressed . . .

Tonight she knew was the turning point, not only in her own life, which after all was unimportant now, but in the life of this small son with whom she had been entrusted. Before the little boy went to sleep she got out Tobias' old Bible and the journal, and sat down at a little *escritoire* beside the bed, holding the books in her lap while she told the child once again something of what his grandfather had expected of them.

After awhile she saw that the little boy had fallen asleep, but still she sat with the journal open at the last page which Tobias had written:

I leave you this heritage, my son. You must be a patriot who can do for the future what the past has done for you.
signed, Tobias Phelps

She felt closer to that old man than she ever had felt before, because now she, too, had a son she wanted to give to the future. She leaned on the *escritoire* then, and wrote her own vow under Tobias' old one.

August 14, 1860

I pledge my son, Toby, to carry on this heritage of faith in God, which brought America here and will help it save our world.

She signed her name with a firm hand, then she looked from the page to Toby's sleeping face, babyish and yet determined in its almost prophetic strength.

She turned to the few blank pages left in the book and peered eagerly at the whiteness of the pages, trying to read the life not yet written there. Not yet written on the face, not yet written on the pages. Nevertheless that life, with all it promised of purpose and meaning, was held firmly in the fist of the future. And where, indeed, was the future unless perhaps it might be lying still in God's mind, waiting to be thought into being?

Then, as she had spoken so many times in her own mind, she said to God, "You can see the future as easily as we see the past. You look into whatever life my son is going to live, and tell me what to do, so that this spark will not be lost."

PART IV

*Starting fresh, as from a second birth,
Man in the sunshine of the world's new Spring
Shall walk transparent like some holy thing.*

Lalla Rookh, THOMAS MOORE

CHAPTER ONE

If Amoret had had half the faith in her own sight that she had in the sight of God, and if she had understood how to use that sight, she might have looked ahead as easily as she looked backward. Perhaps "future" as a concept is as inaccurate a term as it would be in the realm of mathematics. (Yet even here, there is an illusion of time in the traversing of contemplation.)

If she had dared, she might have grasped the secret of knowing that in a world of cause and effect, to look into the future must be very much like looking "ahead" into the multiplication table. There, if one may consider the mental present to be ten times ten, he may look back to two times ten or, just as easily, may prophesy ahead to the answer of five million times ten. The future, from where we stand, feels as yet unwritten; but perhaps it is more true to say that it is only yet unread.

Amoret was still an infant in seeing, and so instead of explicit vision, she had to use unfocused faith. But if she had been able to see, as she was asking God Himself to look, these are some of the things she might have seen, as yet unwritten in time, or in the pages of the worn old journal, or in the sleeping face of the child.

(2)

The year was 1943, and Judge Tobias Phelps was eighty-eight years old. On the outside, that is; within, he felt about the same age he always had felt. Ageless, of course. Amoret would have recognized him as her own small Toby grown old, because he had the same towering forehead, and the same beaky nose. The cowlick, so persistent when he was a baby, was all that had survived of the reddish-blond hair, now white as milkweed silk.

Age was a strange business, Judge Toby often said to himself. One of the most misunderstood circumstances in life. But

you had to be old to see through the hoax. And when you *were* old, nobody wanted to listen to you, in the first place. And in the second, you didn't feel that it was necessary to tear yourself to pieces trying to pound home your discoveries to persons who weren't yet ready for them. By the time you knew something worth saying, you saw how futile it was to try to say it.

Yes, age was a laughable hoax, perpetrated by the body upon its master. The body was really nothing but a horse to carry you from place to place. You kept it fit and fleet; you fed it and groomed it respectably; you stabled it suitably. But not for itself. You did it because what you really needed was a horse to get around on.

Be a wonderful thing, if you *could* change horses in mid-stream. But that, at present, wasn't possible, though with all the legerdemain science was performing these days, it might yet be accomplished. Meantime you found yourself in later years mounted on a slower horse. While you were growing stronger and friskier-minded, and clearer of vision, you found the old horse was getting weaker and wobblier. You deplored that, but it infuriated you to be judged by the decline of your horse.

And yet the world continues to judge a man by the body he lives in, accepting the body as the fact. When people see evidence that you are just as virile and quick and incisive as you've ever been, they are apt to be patronizing or humorous about it.

"The Old Boy tries to keep up," they said. And sometimes he wanted to shout at them, "Keep up? I'm way ahead of you, you poor stumbling muddlers, still weakened by your youth. Your horse is riding *you*, these days. He's telling *you* what to do . . . leading you around by *his* bridle. Wait until you're my age, when you've got that horse tamed at last. Then you'll see what life's about . . ."

But he didn't fool himself much by that. He knew it was all true, what he was saying, but he would have given anything . . . as any man would . . . to find himself mounted on a spirited horse again, rearing up with wild light-neededled eyes and flared nostrils, pawing the dust and snorting to be off on a chase.

Well, he had other steeplechases these days. No less lively, either. He rode across unexplored country now. And often the

way was too perilous to be made on horseback. That crude method of travel was fine on the open plains, but where he ventured these days was often up the sheer face of a mountain; what he explored were sometimes the dazzling crevasses between glaciers. No bodies could go there. Bodies had to be left sitting meekly in a library, nodding by the fire, with some nauseating glass of medicine at hand. A man hadn't much use for a body at his age, and yet he had to cling on to it awhile. He had to suffer its weary presence a bit longer, because there was still work for him to do. The real work of his lifetime, actually.

Perhaps this very night, he might be able to let loose of that brittle old body of his. For today someone . . . the most important person in his world . . . was coming to see him. And if the visit went the way it should go, perhaps tonight . . .

All kinds of important men had visited him in this library of his, during the past thirty-five years. Woodrow Wilson had sat in that other leather chair in front of the fire, for they had been old friends. There was a man! In that very chair he had talked over his first inaugural address with Toby. Wilson had seen the danger and the tragedy in the fabulous industrial wealth of that day. He had called that period not a day of triumph, but a day of dedication. America had come now to its sober second thought, Wilson believed. This was the time to square every process again with the standard set up in the beginning. This was the time to take stock of our industrial success, and measure against it the spiritual cost to the men and women and even the children on whom the weight of it had fallen.

Chief Justice Holmes had sat there, too, and other men less illustrious but not less great—David Adler, the architect, and Marshall Roberts, whose collection of paintings Toby had so enjoyed. A good life had passed through this room, and this house. Toby clenched his thin old hands in impotent hopelessness because he could think of no way of braiding together all the strands of that long good life, and offering it somehow to the man who was coming here to see him now.

For of all the important men who had sat opposite him in that chair, none was so important as the man who would be there in a few minutes. They had been a President, a Chief Justice, financiers, artists, philanthropists . . . yet they were

unimportant compared to him. For they were of the past, and he was of the future.

And besides that, he was the Old Boy's own grandson, Tobias Phelps, III.

The outcome of all the lives before . . . the dedicated life of the first Tobias, the resurrected brave life of Amoret, the fruitful life of the Judge . . . lay now in this boy's hands, to further or to throw away. It all lay in his hands, and tomorrow he was pushing off to war.

The Judge must try to think back through the years, and pick out the significant scenes that had somehow led up to today. He must get them into some kind of order, so he could present them properly; so that Young Toby could see that they added up not to an old man sitting in a leather chair waiting to die, but to himself, a youngster with the world ahead of him. The Old Boy was ready now to turn his trust over to that youngster. He had made his life a vehicle for that trust, and now it must be given to a younger, stronger body which would carry it on into the future, the unpredictable future lying on the other side of the valley of the shadow of war.

Each lifetime was a staircase that mounted to a landing where another flight of stairs began. Each flight depended on those lower ones that brought the mounting up to here. Young Toby must pick up where Old Toby left off. Just as the Old Boy himself had picked up where Amoret had left off. She, in turn, had taken into her own inexperienced girl's hands, what old Tobias had given her . . . He knew that his figure of speech had been lost along the way, in the musing way similes sometimes shift. But the meaning was clear enough, and it was this meaning he must give to the boy.

Perhaps he should begin with himself when he was just the age of this young flier who was coming to see him. Yes, that would make them eye to eye for a moment at least. He'd begin on that last Wednesday in June in the year 1875 when young Toby Phelps was being graduated from the College of New Jersey, which after 1896 was called Princeton. He saw himself, a tall homely lad in very tight trousers, walking under the elms on Mercer Street. The biggest number of seniors yet were to be graduated today. When Stephen Phelps had walked along this very street, back in '33, there had been less than two hundred students at the college, and less than

ten professors, counting the assistants. They had thought themselves quite an institution then! Every year had seen them grow, although the years during the Civil War had been difficult.

But when Judge Toby had been graduated they were a very big college, with a campus having thirteen buildings, counting the School of Science and the Chancellor Green Library, which were barely finished. The campus was full of visitors that morning, even though it was several hours before the exercises were to begin. Undergraduates were escorting parties about, pointing out sacred landmarks such as Nassau Hall. They were explaining to those who did not already know, about the four months from June to November in 1783 when this very building had served as the National Capitol. For during the closing hours of the Revolution, the Congress had found refuge here in the spacious library room, remote from the mutinous troops of Philadelphia. Here, in this very library had been received the first ambassador sent to America from a foreign nation, Pieter J. Van Berckel, Minister Plenipotentiary from the States General of Holland. Many times, while Congress was sitting at Nassau Hall, the great Washington had come over from Newburgh to confer with them.

On this graduation day groups stood about admiring the Big Cannon in the quadrangle in front of Clio and Whig Halls. The Cannon had been abandoned here, because of a broken carriage, by both Washington and Cornwallis on that eventful January morning in 1777 when one of the great battles of the Revolution was fought over these tranquil fields. Toby seldom passed this Big Cannon without remembering his grandfather, old Tobias Phelps, who had been a boy younger than himself in that battle. That was why he had sent his son to college here. And it was why Amoret had wanted her son to be educated on this hallowed spot.

It was much more real to Toby than to some of his classmates, all that history. It bored them, they said. Right now the fresh-faced lads showing the visitors around, were brushing the history aside, and were turning quickly to telling about what really interested them . . . the annual "rush" between Freshmen and Sophomores held around the Big Cannon, and the bonfires built for celebrating sports victories. They were telling with shamefaced sentimentality about the

Seniors' singing on warm spring evenings on the steps of Nassau Hall, and how from the old belfry at nine o'clock the curfew still rang out.

Toby had not told anyone where he was going this morning; he was too proud of it to speak about it casually to his roommates. President McCosh had written him a note bidding him come to his study to say good-bye. The beloved Irishman was sitting at his desk when Toby came into the tall, mellow room, and he got up and came over and clasped his hand, and threw his other arm around the boy's shoulders.

"We shall miss you, Tobias," he said in that fine precise Queens' College accent to which bits of Belfast proudly adhered. The students often did impersonations of President McCosh, but these Toby scorned to laugh at; they weren't so very amusing and a great many boys felt qualified to give them. But though they could imitate James McCosh's Irish voice, they could not copy his noble thinking.

"We shall miss you. You have given us plenty to think about, my boy," the President was saying, "not always comfortable thinking. But you have kept us stirred up, at least." Toby smiled shyly, and looked the President straight in his blue old eye.

"I marked you from the beginning, Phelps," President McCosh went on. "I knew, even when I saw you getting yourself into trouble, that you were going to be a man other men would pay attention to." Toby shifted his feet awkwardly, wondering what he ought to say.

"They'll pay attention to you for mischief, or they'll listen to you for something good, Tobias. And it's your responsibility to see that what you tell them is something worth listening to."

"That's all I want to tell them, sir," Toby said. "You see, the trouble with mischief is that when you're in the midst of it, you believe it's good."

"That you do!" McCosh said. "That's why you're a good mischief-maker, Tobias! You believe in it! You never have your tongue in your cheek about anything you do. You do it with the whole of ye. But the whole of ye has got to work together for good."

"Are you saying good-bye to me, or scolding me, sir?" Toby asked, cocking up one eyebrow.

"No, I'm not scolding you, lad! I'm telling you good-bye

with affection and pride in ye," the President said and laughed his hearty laugh. Then he walked up and down the floor a long time, while he thought of what he wanted to say next.

"There are men who use ideas, Tobias. Then there are men whom great ideas use. Great ideas that bear them up in their hands, like the angels in the Psalm. But sometimes even angels . . . and ideas . . . cannot keep men from dashing their foot against a stone."

"Their foot . . . and sometimes even their heads, sir," Toby said ruefully. "That is, if they are strong-headed fools, as I sometimes am."

"Yes. And even their heads," McCosh agreed. "Well, sometimes it is good for men to dash their heads against a stone. If nothing else will teach them to keep watch over their deeds. But what I wanted to say to you, Tobias, is this: You are a man whom great ideas will use. You have to make yourself a fit home for great ideas to come to. Then they *will* come. They'll live in your mind and in your deeds, and in that voice of yours. That great cathedral of a voice you've got in your chest. Men are going to come and worship in that cathedral of a voice . . . see to it that you give them something worthy of worship."

Toby hung his head, because with all the nimble things he usually found to say, there was nothing good enough to say now.

"I'm going to keep me eye on you, son, after you go out from here. I'm expecting great things of ye."

"Yes, sir," Toby said, like a bashful ten-year-old.

As he walked back to Whig Hall, he thought to himself, "Nobody else can make a Commencement address to me today. It has been made for me." He hoped sometime he would get up his courage to tell Amoret what President McCosh had said to him. She had a right to know about it, for in a way the speech had been made to her and not to him. What McCosh was talking to was what Amoret had put into him. The President had looked past what he had put into himself (being tolerant of all the tomfoolery and the mischief which he was always finding himself in), and he had spoken to that quiet core that his mother had put into him, from the time he was a baby.

She would be here today to watch him receive his sheep-

skin. She would be proud of everything that happened. But the best part of the Commencement had already happened for Toby, and he hoped some day he could tell her about it, for it really belonged to her. But he had never told her. Perhaps he should have written it in a letter to her. His letters during those years had been filled with all his bumptious news about getting started in his law practice.

She had come to New York to visit him, a couple of years after he had set up his office down in Twenty-third Street. Most of his cases at first were pretty puny. "I'm the veterinarian of the legal profession," he had said humbly, because at first the only clients he could seem to get were horses. Henry Bergh who founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had been his friend, and he had turned over all the S.P.C.A. business to him. Horses were pretty important in those days; once when that mysterious epidemic called the epizootic threatened the horses, the whole city had been tied up and paralyzed. Good old Henry Bergh and his officers were tireless about arresting any drivers of streetcars, private carriages, delivery trucks, or even the city sprinkling carts, who disregarded the welfare of their horses. So that's where Toby came in, and much fine oratory he expended on behalf of his four-footed clients. But he learned all right, and he didn't stop with what his colleagues jokingly called the "carriage trade."

He was never quite sure just how much Alyse had been responsible for the beginning of his political career. She had been so ambitious, in a light-hearted kind of way. And she had been so proud of him. But usually for the wrong things in him, he used to think ruefully. Yet, perhaps, that was one reason he himself had worked so hard at keeping the right things alive, the things his mother had given him.

He remembered the first political speech he had made. That was before Alyse Campbell had married him. Women didn't go to political street rallies in those days, not women like Alyse. But she had gone, driving in her smart little black and yellow chaise, and she had brought her father with her, and he had brought Martin Buckel, who was an important ward man in those days. Toby had been running for some miniscular office, but he had put out presidential fervor into his campaign. He had quoted the Bible and Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. He had drawn on Thomas Jefferson

and Andrew Jackson . . . indeed, he had got out the whole genealogy of what has since been called the common man. But he had not done it craftily; he had done it because it was what he believed, as he believed in God Himself.

Those grubby earnest listeners had huddled close around him and he had loved every one of them. That had always been his failing, Alyse had said; he had loved the people so much. Not just nice people, but all kinds.

"You love them so much, you always think they're better than they are," Alyse used to complain.

"But they *are* better than they are," he had replied enigmatically. He had meant just that, and quite a few times in his life, he had proved that it was so. He had seen that some poor wretch was better than he was behaving, and that had pulled his behavior up a notch. It was something he had learned from watching Joel Adams.

But this night, down in Division Street, where many of the listeners in his crowd were hunchbacks half-buried under loads of sewing they were carrying home to do, he had tried to tell them about the government of this country. Quite earnestly he had used the time not to extol his own indeterminate qualifications for the small office, but as an opportunity to tell these unlearned, poverty-ridden men and women what a wealth they had chosen for themselves because they had made America their country.

He had sketched for them the three branches of our democratic system of government, the judicial, the legislative, and the executive. But while he was patiently explaining it he suddenly had realized in a flash of inspiration where that conception had originated. It was so clear to him that it stunned him for a moment. Isaiah, back in the Old Testament, had had a vision of it! That old Prophet had never been taught political science, but he had a swift far-seeing vision of what lay behind true government, and he proclaimed it unforgettably in Isaiah 33:22. "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; He will save us."

As simply as he could, Toby had told those gaping, weary people about that verse, and what it could mean if men looked to God as the head of government, if men listened to what God would say in their hearts about the judging, the law-giving, and the leadership.

He remembered yet the tingling in his own veins as the

full meaning of those Bible words had burst upon him. He knew then why his voice had been made beautiful and his speech had been freed from its halting: so that some day he could speak such a vision as he had seen that night down on Division Street, with the miserable sweatshop workers looking up at him. That flash of understanding had become the cornerstone on which he had built his whole career. He had called upon that vision in every crisis of decision, great and small. He had expounded it reverently whenever there were good men to listen.

Alyse's father and Martin Buckel had taken him home after the meeting, and had said to him, "Son, you have the common touch. You'll go a long way in our politics, if you'll let us help you. You know how to twist a crowd around your tongue. Give 'em a shot of the Bible, and a pinch of George Washington. Let 'em think *they're* the important people of the earth. Let 'em think money has got to listen to *them* some day . . . you know the formula, son . . ." He had felt his stomach squirm with disgust at that disillusioned expediency. He had scorned them, as young ardent idealists always loathe the bitterly old. He wanted nothing to do with them . . . But the next day, when he had driven with Alyse through Central Park, he had seen the whole thing differently. She had helped him see it, with that practical common sense of hers.

"Of course you'll let them help you, Toby," she had said. "Let them help you for *their* reasons, and you accept for *yours*. They're going to back some young man. It's your opportunity to see that they back an honest one, who really wants to help the people, and knows how to do it."

That was the day he had asked Alyse to marry him. "Thank heavens, darling," she had said, "I thought you'd never get around to it. I thought I'd have to wait until Leap Year, and then climb up a ladder to your window and elope with you."

She had been very sweet those years, all a woman could be. She had loved and managed him, and laughed at him and boasted about him. And she had never come within hurting distance of knowing what was really in his heart to be accomplished. Perhaps that is a safe basis for an idealist's marriage. . . .

At any rate it had been a happy marriage, and Alyse had gone on to her last day, as beautiful to him as she always had

been. Women were not as lovely in these days as they had been in Alyse's time, he often thought wistfully. She had had dark Irish hair, and the whitest skin and the bluest eyes ever seen. She had a merry laugh, and when she talked to you, she slipped her hand up under your arm in a confiding and disarming way. She was a beautiful equestrienne, and was never lovelier than when she was mounted on a chestnut mare, with her groom following behind her.

"I pour nicely into a tight habit," she used to say roguishly to her husband, "and I wear my silk topper with a certain dash. I suppose that's why I love the riding."

"I suppose it is, you minx," he said. (Something mischievous and yet snug passed out of human relationship, when men stopped calling women "minxes," Toby sometimes thought.)

Mrs. Phelps had been one of the group which tried to force the new elevated railroad to station a flagman at the Fifty-third Street crossing, to warn riders to rein in their horses when one of the thundering monsters was charging down the elevated tracks on Sixth Avenue. When the penurious company refused, it was Alyse who said, "Don't let's bother with them. We'll take up a collection and station our own flagman at the crossing." And so they had. Alyse was like that. She believed in getting things done, and if there was no other way of managing, she did the job herself.

She had loved all active sports; he could see her now in the winter twilight skating parties up in the Park. She wore a little moleskin cape, and a close little hat with a pink velvet rose, no pinker than her cheeks under her tight silken veil. She was a most graceful skater, and her skirt, with the pep-lum drapes across the front, used to fly like wings. He himself, he remembered with chagrin, wore a fuzzy tam-o'shanter set squarely on his head. He had brandished a mustache in those days, and was as near as he ever came to being a handsome man. But that, he knew even then, was because he had a wife who loved him extravagantly. Nothing makes a man handsomer. . . .

He remembered the first time he ever held his son in his arms. That was in 1884. Alyse had been very pleased about having the baby. They had been married nearly three years, and she was beginning to be a little worried. People didn't mention expected babies very freely in those days, but Alyse .

had told everyone she knew. She was simply enchanted with the whole idea.

"I want him to inherit his father's heavenly disposition, and my good looks," she had said shamelessly. "But he'll probably look like Toby and act like the little fiend I am."

"I'll spank him, in that case," Toby had said to her. "That's something I've never been able to do to his mother."

"But if he can inherit only one thing from the two of us," Alyse had said quite seriously, "I want it to be your way of talking, Toby. Your beautiful voice . . . you could persuade anybody to do anything. Especially me."

The Old Boy remembered now how pleased he had been by her saying that. For it suddenly brought back to him something he had long ago forgotten.

"Do you know, my dear, that when I was a small child I stammered?" he had said to his wife. "It nearly caused a tragedy to our family."

"I can't believe it—you *never* stammered," Alyse said. "You have the most beautiful diction on earth."

"I had to learn it," he said, "and I had to learn much else, because of the stammering."

"What else?"

"How it feels to be laughed at. That's why . . ."

"That's why you're always championing the downtrodden underdog," she said much too lightly. "Well, I suppose then it was a good thing. It's made you sweet and kind, Toby. But sometimes . . . sometimes I really wish, my dear, that you'd be on the side of our own class of people for once."

"Our own class?" he had said as gently as he could. "Do we have classes in America?"

"Of course we do," she had said sharply.

"I thought this country was founded because all men were created equal."

"Nonsense," she said pleasantly. "I'm just grateful you and I were created to live on the extreme top of the upper crust."

He had not argued with her. He saved his arguments for court where they might do some good. And to have ready for that son whom he wanted to bring up to be his staunch ally. He remembered that morning when the nurse put the baby in his arms for the first time. He had looked like all babies, naturally, a scowling brownish little blur among the blankets. But Toby had peered into that primitive crude suggestion of

a face with much emotion, for the baby seemed to him wonderfully important.

"So this is Amoret's grandson," he had said to himself; and then to the baby, "She expected great things of you, mister."

The baby had yawned, in a droll, impudent way. The nurse, a capable rustle of starched cumbersome linen . . . a whole laundry-bag of linen, it seemed to him . . . had felt that she ought to apologize for the baby's manners.

"You'll have to pardon us, Da-Da," the nurse had said in her silly baby-talk. "We haven't learned our manners yet."

Then she had recovered from her nonsense to ask, "What are you and Mrs. Phelps naming him, sir? Or have you had time to decide?"

"His name is Amory," Toby said experimentally. "He's named for his grandmother . . . yes, that's his name, Amory Phelps."

It gave him a great deal of pleasure that Alyse had agreed to the name. "It sounds quite distinguished," she had said, "and there's no need to tell people we've named a *boy* for your *mother*, dear. We can just say it is an old family name."

"It is," he said soberly. "She was the best of the Phelps, man and boy."

They had entered then into a passage of happy years. There wasn't much to tell about happy years. The years of contentment, like the peaceful nations, seem to write little history. But the happier the young Phelps were, the more poignantly Toby felt the misery of the sniveling cringing small cases that came to him as magistrate in one of the lower courts where he was now serving. This was '88, the year of the big blizzard, a winter when poverty and wretchedness seemed to hatch out more than their usual brood of petty crimes. Or perhaps it only seemed so to Judge Phelps, because he suffered with every mean little life that dragged its shameful tatters through his court.

One day he felt that he could stand no more of it. A sad old garbage bag of a man was standing before him, accused of some petty thievery from a delivery wagon which had been backed up to the rear door of the fashionable Sandy Spencer's restaurant across the street from the Astor Rotunda. The dispirited dirty-faced little man cast one beseeching eye up at Toby, who was leaning over the desk to see if there was anything in the miscreant's face on which he could build. As if

he had read what was in the Judge's mind, the old man shook his head mutely.

"Come, come . . . how do you want to plead in this case?" Toby asked, as kindly as possible.

"I don't know how I want to plead, your honor. I guess I might as well admit I took the bread from off the wagon, sir."

"You don't deny you stole this bread from the delivery wagon?" Judge Phelps said sternly.

"No, your honor. I didn't go to take the bread, sir. But all of a sudden, seeing it . . . such a lot of it . . . and I hadn't had anything to eat, sir . . . and well, I just grabbed two loaves. I just kinda went crazy, I guess you might say."

"You went crazy, hmm?" Toby said, looking fiercely around the courtroom. It was filled as usual with a variety of persons, ordinary citizens who were appearing in court to complain about some injustice to themselves, a few complacent lawyers, several students heartlessly drinking in "atmosphere," and two newspaper reporters, lolling indifferently at the big press table, not expecting anything interesting to "break" but just whiling away their time until something better came up.

"So you went crazy, hmm?" Toby repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes, your honor, you might say," the trembling little criminal said, wearily brushing back a fluff of tired-looking gray hair from his bony forehead.

Judge Phelps glanced over the room again, and then he scowled. "I find you guilty," he said in his loudest, most arresting voice. "I find you guilty of being old and hungry and even ill. I find you guilty of probably having no decent place to sleep, nor any family to cherish you, of spreading germs wherever you go, and fear into any understanding heart that looks at you. But most of all I find you guilty of being a reproach to my own well-being, and of ruining my excellent dinner tonight when I sit down at my table and remember you . . . I also find you an affront against the principles of brotherly love on which this country was founded."

The little man blinked his eyes and sniveled uncertainly, not sure of what was happening. The courtroom roused up and stirred into shocked activity. The two newspaper men at the press table tugged at their handlebar mustaches, and gazed in amazement at each other, then seized their pencils which were reposing behind their ears, and began scribbling furiously.

Judge Phelps continued in a softer, more compassionate voice, "I fine you twenty dollars, for these offenses."

"But, your honor, sir . . . I haven't got no . . ." The old man was muttering, dabbing at his eyes with a grimy hand.

The Judge had risen from his chair now, and had reached under his voluminous silk robe. He got out his wallet, and took out a twenty-dollar bill, which he handed down to the clerk of the court.

"I myself shall pay your fine," he said in a loud, angry voice. "But even by that device I cannot free my conscience of your guilt, sir."

The whole courtroom was now in a flutter and a murmur. But it quieted instantly, as the Judge lent on with his findings.

"And I impose a further fine of one dollar upon each person present before this court, which fine is for being guilty of living in a society where such spectacles as a hungry old man stealing bread from a fashionable restaurant can occur without effective protest."

The spectators looked aghast at first; then they seemed embarrassed; but finally they broke out in smiles of approval. Toby could remember their faces to this day, the shamed sheepish faces of people who are caught being guilty of smug security in the midst of poverty.

"The officers will collect the fines, and will turn them over to the defendant. The court will take a recess," he had barked then. Angrily, but with great dignity, he had risen from the bench and had gone back into his private chambers.

He had acted on his conception of Isaiah's prophetic words which he had seen so clearly that night on Division Street, when he was talking to the poor garment workers.

"The Lord is the Judge. He will save," Isaiah had said.

Immediately began a respectful rapping on the door of Toby's chamber. He knew who it was, all right. The reporters. Well, let them knock their knuckles raw; he had had his say and that was all there was to it.

But it was not all there was to it, by any means. The morning papers had the story splashed across the front pages. Laffan of the *Sun* put an editorial box in the center of his front page with a headline which read, "Direct descendant of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln."

It was quite an editorial, as the Old Boy remembered it.

Went something like this: "In an age of materialism such as we are now living under, human rights usually rank low in importance. But not in the courtroom of Judge Tobias Phelps, who yesterday indicted and fined society for its crime in allowing an old man to become hungry enough to steal.

"More than a hundred years ago Benjamin Franklin uttered a description which applies to our own Judge Toby Phelps better than to any man in public life today.

"Ben Franklin said, 'He who will introduce into public affairs the principles of primitive Christianity, will revolutionize the world.'"

Old Toby thought now, sitting in his library with his grandfather's Bible on his knees, that Ben Franklin had been a little glib about revolutionizing the world. It wasn't a thing that could happen quickly or easily. Not until men desired it; not until they wearied of the mockery of godlessness, and sickened of its pain enough to search and try and change. But the revolutionizing of the world was going on. Unmistakably it was going ahead. Though the speed of light in the physical realm was swift, the speed of light in men's minds seemed creepingly slow. But it was Light, and it could not be turned back.

Many times in his own career he had seen that was true. Whenever God was acknowledged as the Judge, it seemed that He gave the courage and the wisdom to act boldly, so that there could be a saving, and a turning, in the thoughts of those who saw. Whenever Toby had turned to his understanding that God and not Toby Phelps was the Judge who could save, an influx of courage and boldness had animated his actions. It involved a paradox as old as the adventure between men and their Maker, a coincidence of meekness and mightiness which seemed to give right of way among human affairs. The meekness, of course, came from claiming no praise for oneself; the might, the immeasurable might, which took hold of a situation and lifted it above the littleness and scheming of men, came from relying on the power of God. In proportion as he had done that, his career had advanced. Every year seemed to single him out and mark him among his colleagues.

Yet, through these years there had been one great sorrow to him. That was Amory, his son. It would not be necessary to say much about Amory to the boy when he came; he un-

derstood his father as well as Old Toby did. Through the years Amory had been his great disappointment. A ghastly successful man he was . . .

Through him Judge Toby had learned that there are some men whose inner eye is closed. Through him he had known the saddest helplessness on earth, the inability to open that eye for another man, until he chooses himself to lift the inner eyelid and look upon the earth waiting to be discovered. Amory was so astute about all worldly things, so canny and clever and fortunate. Yet so restlessly miserable, as a man always is whose inner eye is closed.

Toby remembered now that morning in 1904, when Amory was a dashing twenty-year-old, home from Princeton on the occasion of his father being sworn into office. Amory was much more impressed by the fact that his father had headed the alumni committee which had just built the New Gymnasium Building at a cost of three hundred thousand dollars, than he was by the appointment of Old Toby to the State Supreme Court.

"Wait'll I get back to New York, Old Boy . . . we'll go into business together," Amory had said. "You're too smart a man to drowse away your life on a judge's bench. Why, that puny little salary they pay you . . . You and I are going to make real money!"

"Thanks, son," he had said. "But I'm afraid I can't afford to work for money."

That morning Alyse had been proud of him. She had been very beautiful in a dove-colored broadcloth dress, trimmed with purple velvet. She had balanced on her head a huge platter of a hat on which nodded and blew purple willow plumes. When she walked, her rather tight skirt twitched at the hem into velvet billows, and the long knotted-together fronds of the plumes were in constant dreamy motion.

"I have to be as beautiful as possible," she had said when he complimented her. "I am the wife of the most distinguished-looking Judge in the state."

She inspected his appearance with great fondness, walking around him with the rustling of billows and fluttering of plumes, to admire from all sides his morning coat and striped trousers.

"One thing about a homely man . . . of course you've never been really *homely*, my darling," she had said. "But

one thing . . . he seems to grow more distinguished-looking when he begins to have a little white in his hair."

"After all, my dear," he had laughed. "I've not been appointed on my looks, you know."

"Well, nevertheless," she had insisted demurely, "you look very handsome. If only . . ."

"If only what?" he had asked affectionately.

"If only you'd try and not antagonize the influential people, darling. Papa says you're very willful about it. Must you *always* be standing up for the grubby common herd?"

"I seem to have got on very well, in spite of that," he had said hesitantly.

Amory, then, twirling his derby on his forefinger while he lolled at ease upon the Turkish divan in the corner of the room, had come to his defense, in a young patronizing kind of way.

"No, mother. Perhaps the Old Boy's right. After all, every grubby common man has a vote. And if the Judge insists on public service, votes will count. He knows what he's doing, making friends of the multitude."

Toby remembered even now how he had felt that morning. Not disgusted . . . not even really saddened about the youthful cynicism. Because it was only youth, and youth is one thing you can count on your son outgrowing.

"You know what Oscar Wilde says," Amory was continuing with lazy delight in his own voice, "there's nothing cleverer than good behavior!"

Alyse had said poutingly, and without any humor at all, "Yes, that's true. But your father doesn't do it to be clever. He just doesn't know any better, do you, darling?"

She had looked down at her ruby-encrusted little watch pinned to her hard correct bosom, then she had given her marcelled pompadour a quick pat.

"One more thing, dear," she had said importantly. "I want you to use this beautiful new book I've bought for the ceremony."

"Book? What book?"

"Why, the Bible, of course. You're supposed to place your hand on the Bible while you take the oath," she said with bustling feminine informativeness. "I've bought a really handsome one for the occasion."

Toby had looked at her, and had considered trying to make her understand. Then he had given up and instead had merely thanked her for her thoughtfulness.

"And you *will* see that the new one is used," she had insisted. "It will look so stunning in the photographs."

"Photographs?"

"Yes, darling. Papa has arranged to have those people with that new contraption, the moving picture vitascope, try and photograph the whole ceremony . . . He says it will be so useful when you run for Governor."

But he had not used the specially purchased handsome Bible. He had taken his oath on Amoret's old Book. Just as he had intended to from the time he was a small boy.

The dozen years that followed were a blurred ascent now. Nothing really mattered from them in the final summing up except that Alyse had died quite unexpectedly, leaving him lonely and quiet for a time. Leaving him freer, too, he had to admit now that their long love had receded to a dim vista, to live his days in a simpler and more dedicated way. It was no longer necessary for him to apologize because he was not politically ambitious. He had done everything he could for her, while she was there to twinkle her blue eyes up into his face, and tell him how proud of him she was. After she was gone, he found he could live more effectually separated from the men who wanted to use his benevolence for their own purposes. He wasn't less active; on the contrary, he worked harder than ever.

But he worked in different ways from then on. He had thought it out quite simply; it appeared to him as a choice. He could have worked through his life accumulating some hundreds of thousands of dollars, and, since Amory would never need his money, at the end he could have left that money to several charities. Or he could leave his bequest to the world right then, and spend the rest of his years paying that bequest in his own efforts and understanding and abilities. Instead of leaving them his money, he left them himself, at his prime.

He became the steward and administrator of several funds, an endowment to educate promising Jewish children, a fund to mail library books into rural districts where no libraries reached, an agency to find foster homes for children; he was

on the board of many well-established charities, including his old friend Bergh's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Finally, all of these activities headed up into a new profession for him, that of being advisor to persons who wished to make intelligent gifts and bequests. The rich reward of his life seemed to him to be this wonderful period; there had been nearly thirty years of being that most blessed man on earth, the good Samaritan. You couldn't ask any more of life, he often said to himself, than to be always at the point where good Samaritanism is. You couldn't want more of life than he had, he often said to himself when he went to bed at night tired out and yet quieted into peace with all that the day had brought to him.

Often he would think back to that little prayer which old Joel Adams had taught him when he was a tiny boy. "Father, I am Your child. And this is Your day. Let us both fill each other with Your good. Amen." In his mind he still saw those two colored drugstore window bottles which long ago had become quaint antiques, each pouring itself into the other. His life had been an animation and dramatization of the simple child's prayer.

The later years were the happiest for him personally, because in them he had known his grandson. He appreciated those years especially because it had seemed for a long time that he was to have no grandchild. Amory had been thirty-six years old when young Toby was born. He had had two marriages by that time, the first a quick flamboyant explosion shortly after he was graduated from Princeton, and the second a social achievement. But it was an unhappy, hectic affair which dragged him all over the world from one fashionable spot to the next trying to smooth out one quarrel after another with the beautiful, spoiled nymphomaniac who had married him. It was from one of these transitory reconciliations that the little Toby had been born. But however it had happened, however circuitously it had happened, the important fact was that now there was another Phelps. Now there was to be another chance for them.

He remembered the first day he had seen his grandson. He had come up from Washington where he had been doing some special committee work, and had leaped into a taxi and had come straight over to the hospital. Amory, smooth-looking and impatient, had been waiting for him at the top of

the steps of the private hospital, and had run down to snatch open the taxi door excitedly.

"So we're to have a younger generation at last," the Judge had said.

"You're the only one in the family really pleased about it, dad," Amory said, looking mightily pleased himself.

"I'm thankful enough for all of us," the Judge had cried, clapping his son delightedly on the back. "You look like a father this morning. I guess having a son will make you grow up, Amory, if anything will."

"Dismal thought," Amory said.

They walked up the wide steps together and the Judge asked about Bernice, and how much the baby weighed. Amory said, "Bernice is furious, of course. She says it will ruin her figure."

"Nonsense!" old Toby said jovially, "it may make a woman of her."

Then he looked affectionately at his own son, and happiness had bubbled out of him. "I *am* pleased, Amory. I need another youngster. I've got things I want to tell him. Things I want to give him."

Amory looked at his father with amusement, then he said, "I've plenty to give him myself, as a matter of fact. I don't mind telling you, dad, things have been going mighty well for me in the last few years."

"War, Amory, never goes well for anybody," he said briefly. "Well, you manufacturers are certainly the silver lining to war, if there is such a thing."

His son had looked annoyed at this crude association of ideas. "It's not just the war," Amory said defensively. "The war's been over three years."

They went down a wide summery-looking corridor toward the Phelps' large suite in the very fashionable hospital. It didn't resemble the kind of hospitals where Judge Toby did his work. It looked instead like a more than usually luxurious resort hotel. Everything was brightness and softness, with deep dusky-rose rugs, and mauve walls with niches banked with flowers. Canaries sang in the sunny windows, and the nurses spoke like Vassar girls.

Toby said, "So this is the way the babies of the very rich are born, hmm? Amoret had me in her own bedroom. And I doubt very much if it ever occurred to her that she might be

ruining her figure. Maybe that was why she was such a beautiful woman. I used to have a little desk right beside hers in the brickyard office . . ."

He saw immediately, as he always did, how much it displeased Amory to hear about the dull past. Amory was ashamed of the past, really. So the Judge quickly switched his remembering back to this dainty opulence.

"It must give babies a very reassuring impression of the world they're being born into," he said placatingly.

"My son has to have the best."

"The best?" The Judge tested the word. "That depends on how you look at it, son. Well, you give him your fortune. And I'll give him mine and Amoret's. We'll see which one lasts for him."

Amory looked at him now with annoyed antagonism. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said patronizingly.

"You never did, son," his father said. But he said it kindly. "Let's go in and see if the baby knows."

It seemed during the next five or six years that his grandson really did know what he was talking about. But perhaps it was only that the Old Boy was the only fixed point in the shifting universe in which the child lived. Nobody else seemed to have time for him. But Judge Toby had time, and the little boy trailed around with him to his conferences and his board meetings. As soon as he was old enough to be left without a nursemaid, the child went with his grandfather wherever he could be taken. The two of them were familiar figures going about New York City, the old man and the handsome small boy. You wouldn't think two like that would have much in common. But they did. As he thought back over it now, it didn't seem to the old Toby that he had to do much adjusting to make himself understandable and interesting to his grandson. He couldn't remember that he had ever talked babyishness to the child. He talked with him as he would have talked to any growing intelligence. It was amazing what mature and sensible and realistic ideas can be phrased in simple language, when there is an eager, appreciative young brain wanting to hear.

When the time finally came that Bernice got her divorce from Amory, it wasn't much of a shock to the little boy. Old Toby had taken him up to Newport for a few days, intending to tell him in some casual fashion. They were walking along the seashore and the little boy was very quiet.

Suddenly he had said, "Do you think maybe you'll ever get a divorce from me, grandfather?" He squinted up at the old man in troubled earnestness.

"No, Toby. Never."

"My mother got one from me," he said gruffly. "Miss Kane says I'm not going to see her ever again." He picked up a stone and hurled it into an incoming wave. "I don't care," he said belligerently. "She was plastered half the time anyway."

In 1929 when the stock market crash came, he had thought that might make a difference to Amory. It had wiped out many of the men the Judge knew; indeed, some of the worthiest charities had to trim themselves down to the bone during the next years. But it hadn't made any difference to Amory.

The Judge remembered the telephone conversation they had had that fateful September day. "Everything all right, son?"

"With me? Sure. I never get caught, dad. I saw it coming, and I unloaded on the other fellow," Amory had said in a hearty voice.

As he heard the words, he remembered Amoret's telling him of old Tobias in a parallel circumstance. In the first financial panic which this country experienced, Tobias had lost his family's fortune . . . and had gained for them an imperishable wealth . . . by trying to save the other fellow.

It was one of the times in life when the Judge had been most deeply ashamed of Amory, with all his heartlessness and cynical shrewdness.

"I unloaded on the other fellow," he had said boastfully, and the Judge had said in his heart, "I'm glad you can't see your grandson, Amoret."

No, the stock market collapse and the later depression didn't do anything to Amory's fortune. But it did a great deal to Amory's son. It was difficult to explain just why it did damage to the boy. Certainly not in any material way, for so well-insulated was his comfort and security that no hint of harm could touch it. But the depression was such a blow to the principles of the American people that even the children felt the confusion and uncertainty.

You could not understand why this was so, Judge Toby thought, unless you explored a bit into the original pioneer psychology which made Americans different from other peoples. You had to realize that in the very woof and warp of

them was woven the Puritan idea that only the good persons are happy, that right must win, and that if a man expects to succeed he must abide by the rules of righteousness. Setbacks and defeats are but warnings that he is either not trying hard enough, or is not pursuing the right course. If he wishes something to help him, he must get over on the right side; or go down in shame.

If a crushing blow comes to him, it is proof positive that he has been irretrievably wrong, and must begin again with a complete change of ideals. The depression was a parable of these basic principles in action. When the blow came to the whole helpless country, it must mean that it was wrong. If wrong, it must in some dramatic way repent, and then reform.

America, disillusioned already and disappointed in itself because it had won a war and then had walked out on the peace, for no better reason than that it wanted to build itself more fabulous gadgets, had suddenly been slapped down in the very department of the gadgets. In the depression, Americans (the rich, as they said, "down to their last yacht," the poor out of a job) waited for a heartening interpreter to rise and send them back to reform and a new beginning that they could put their backs into. Just as Stephen and Amoret had seen hordes of them with their remnants loaded into wagons in 1837 pushing over the Alleghenies, Americans wanted now to find a new frontier where they could begin again in pioneer hardship and glory.

The depression could have been turned into a great reviving, moral adventure, if someone had known how to interpret it thus. But no one arose with skill enough to pick up the scattered meaning, and enunciate it so that the young could burn with idealism and the old could re-evaluate . . . and all could dare again. Instead, as Judge Toby viewed the scene, there rose a man with a great and dangerous dream, who loved humanity not wisely but too well. So governmental paternalism further humiliated their spirit by treating these hardy but frustrated pioneers, who only wanted to help themselves, like helpless children. The very quality in them which would have been their saving was independent private effort, and this was publicly rebuked. The country broken in spirit, guilty and confused, tried to laugh it off with slogans and wisecracks. The young, who understood none of it, became openly defiant of all that was ordered and tried.

The depression might have become a reassurance, showing that Something was keeping watch and punishing justly, as a loving parent punishes a well-cared for child. And that would have been a deep moral comfort. For it is the nature of guilt that it finds its balm in punishment. The knowledge that punishment is vigilant and sure, brings with it the corollary that reward, too, waits for us if we are good enough to earn it. Punishment, as surely as reward, boxes the compass of behavior with certainty.

But because this was not said during those years in terms that could be understood, there was a feeling of loss and confusion, and a deep unspoken despair abroad in the land. A lawlessness, and the fearful suspicion that perhaps there is no law to safeguard us.

So there grew up during those years a verdant jungle of cynicism, a hard determination to beat the game next time, since there was only moral chaos anyway (and rules were only to appease the softies and the sissies!). If right didn't win, as you had been led to expect, then you might as well beat any way you could, and no holds barred.

The most sensitive persons were the most deeply outraged in their unacknowledged idealism, and these, in many cases, became the most debauched and lawless. The young, in other words, suffered the greatest ravages of mass conscience.

The Judge understood that about young Toby. He knew that there is a hunger for goodness in men which must be fed. If it is not fed, men sicken for it and become lawless and defiant. In the end, men rebel against law which does not hold them to their best. But until new order emerges, this rebellion appears to have turned against all law, and repudiates abiding by law.

The Judge never could explain this to Amory, because they had no bridge of vocabulary between them on which to meet. He could only stand by when the young Toby seemed to be turning against everything that was lawful and decent and accepted by the old order.

Amory scolded the boy out of one side of his mouth, and laughed at his misdemeanors out of the other. "He's a chip off the old block," Amory said boastfully to his friends. "When I was his age I was already in the wild oats business myself. And doing very well."

Occasionally, however, the boy's behavior came to an unhappy climax; finally he was invited to leave Groton. The

Judge made a trip up to Concord, New Hampshire, and persuaded his friend, Doctor Samuel Drury, to give him a chance at Saint Paul's. He was a handsome, spoiled, impetuous boy with an easy way of getting around anybody in command. It was as if he went about begging mutely for some safe and reassuring authority to take him in hand. Saint Paul's was exactly what he needed, and he tested its strength in several episodes, and then held onto the stern discipline almost with relief. But after he left there he swerved off into wild unruliness. It pained his grandfather now to remember it, and he refused to do it, because he had never blamed the boy. He had blamed instead the immediate things that made the boy war against the older, finer heritage in his blood.

He remembered that day, not so many years ago, when Amory had lunched with him at the Union League Club to talk things over. Young Toby was a sophomore at Princeton now, a precariously balanced sophomore. "Well, they're giving him one more chance," Amory said, not too boastfully now.

Judge Toby asked, "Your . . . influence, son?"

Amory cocked up his eyebrow at his father's hesitating over the word. "That's a pretty name they use for financial persuasion, isn't it?" he said bitterly. Then he added, "No, I didn't endow any laboratories, nor subsidize any football teams this time."

"I'm glad to hear that," the Judge said. "Sooner or later Toby's got to stand on his own. Without benefit of his dad's money, Amory."

"If there *was* any influence used, it was yours," Amory said.

"Mine? What influence have I, in this day and age?"

"You're a legend . . . you're the little boy who listened to Lincoln. You're a legend in a world that's hungry for something to believe in. Princeton would like to see to it that you have a grandson to be proud of, sir."

"I am proud of Toby," the old Judge said fiercely.

"Oh, certainly. He's been kicked out of our best schools," Amory said. "He's full of communism and rebellion and wise-cracks and bad manners. I don't know what's the matter with that kid. I've given him everything."

Judge Toby said, "Everything except something to live by. But he'll get that one of these days."

Amory looked up at his father and said sarcastically, "I suppose you'll give him that? You've talked about it all his life . . ."

"No. I won't give it to him," the Judge said. "But events will. We're rushing to the end of an epoch, son . . . We can't save this country even materially, until it wakes up spiritually . . ."

He always remembered that when they had come out of the Union League Club, on the street had been a montage of newspaper headlines. Munich, and the umbrella that hadn't kept off the deluge.

Before two years had passed, the war was fully upon them. The war had seemed custom-made for young Toby. He was ready to drop education to look for real trouble anyway, and this was a chance to do it and be praised for it. His star was among the first handful on the service flag which was hung, ironically enough, above the collection in the exhibition room at Nassau Hall which shows the development of edged instruments from the advent of man to the present day.

He had gone through rather a long training period, it seemed to the boy. But now he was really a pilot ready to "shove off." Just when, nobody knew. . . .

Suddenly the house, always so decorously quiet these days, quickened to life. There was noise downstairs, not the padding elderly footfalls of the Judge's old servants, but good healthy young *noise*. First a door slammed, and then there was a clatter of things being dumped on the floor, bags and musical instruments and a clutter of valuables young Toby wanted his grandfather to keep for him. Then, all over the downstairs, big soft-doors opened discreetly, and the Judge could hear Toby calling out to gray old heads popping out to see what was happening.

Then there was the unctuous Williams taking charge with quavering authority. "Better let me tell him first, Mr. Toby. He may be asleep," old Williams was saying. But young Toby was already running up the long gentle slope of stairs, two at a time.

"Don't worry, chum," he was calling back to Williams, and the Judge could imagine Williams' face with his shocked mouth, open as the cup on a golf green. "Don't worry, chum, I'll wake him carefully. Old Boy'll be glad to see me."

"Wake *whom?*" the Judge asked from the door of his li-

brary. Then he lowered his voice so Williams wouldn't be offended, "My golly, they expect me to spend all my time sleeping like a baby!"

Toby ran at him like the young lion he was, and he stopped just a step before he really overpowered the old man with one of his rough hugs. He stopped and drew himself up in a quick military salute.

"Lieutenant Toby Phelps of the Air Corps reporting, sir," he said, saluting with a wink. "Any last-minute orders?"

"Plenty of orders," the Judge said. They shook hands, man to man, and Toby had to look down only a trifle, for the Old Boy was still tall, and not as bent as you'd expect.

"Come on in, son, and give me the low-down on the war."

Toby pulled up a hassock and sat down in front of him. Thank God, the boy wasn't being solemn and quiet the way people usually were when they came to see him these days, as if he were an invalid or an imbecile. He was shouting half-finished sentences, and laughing, and looking around, the way he always did when he met a good friend. There was no chasm of generations yawning between them.

"So you're ready to go," the Judge said.

"Ready? Hell, I've been ready for months, except the brass hats wouldn't let loose of me," Toby said.

"You don't know when, I suppose?"

"Well, we have a faint remote. Anyway, it won't be today, Old Boy. Say, you're looking super. I bet you'd like to be coming with me, wouldn't you?"

The Judge shook his head. Toby had always said that, whenever he had been starting somewhere, back to school . . . to summer camp . . . off for some jaunt with his pals . . . and usually the Judge said, "I sure would, son. But I've got some delinquent girls to take care of (or impoverished Pekineses, or some other such thing)." But this time he only shook his head. It startled them both, for it was the first time he hadn't wanted to be going out on the adventure. But this time . . .

"Each man to his own journey," the Judge said.

Toby didn't let that pass. Toby never let anything pass.

"Listen, Old Boy, If you're thinking of slipping off somewhere, and not being here when I get back, I'm going to be so good and mad . . ."

The Judge laughed, shaking his shoulders with mirth as he

had not laughed for a long time.

"Tell me about the dame situation," he said.

"Sure," Toby rubbed his hands together. "Only we're calling them chicks this year, Judge. They're slick chicks these days. But I've been so damn busy . . ." He bumbled on then, telling the Old Boy all kinds of stuff, and it was the best hour the old man had had for a year.

Then the Judge reached out to the little table where old Tobias' Bible was lying, and picked it up.

"I want you take this with you, Toby."

"What is it?" Toby asked, and when he recognized it he looked embarrassed. It was the first time in his whole life that the Judge had seen him look embarrassed. Why is it, he thought compassionately, that men are always embarrassed about the Bible, until they begin to know the book?

Toby, characteristically, went at it manfully. He took the Book in his hands and looked at his grandfather. But as if he could see into the boy's mind, the old man knew he was thinking that at last the Judge had let him down . . . finally the Old Boy really was acting like the oldest generation.

"It's your Bible, isn't it?" He held it awkwardly, wanting to do the right thing if possible. "I remember all the things you used to tell me about your mother, sir . . ." It was the first time he had called him "sir" . . .

"Toby, we haven't much time, but I've got to tell you . . ." The hopelessness of trying to make the boy realize seemed to weaken his very bones. He could only yearn toward him without words, loving the youngness and the hidden goodness in him and trusting that somehow . . .

The boy still held the book, trying to find the right kind of appreciation to offer, and the Judge saw that in his gallant way he had decided that the most courteous thing he could do was to accept the gift. Young Toby looked relieved that the moment had come to that conclusion, but he laid the book back on the table awkwardly.

"Thanks a lot, Old Boy. Mighty nice of you. I know what the book's meant to you all this time. If you're sure you can spare it . . ." He said it gently. Too gently. The old man heard the courtesy and the gentleness coming for the first time across that chasm of the generations which now yawned between them.

"I won't need it where I'm going," the Judge said. Then in

a very strong voice he made one last attempt. "But you'll need it in your business, son. You have some generals in this war of yours who read it every day. Marshall himself, and Montgomery . . ."

Toby cut him short, as if he were committing some lamentable gaucherie. "Well, thanks a million. You know, I don't have time to do much reading. Never did have, matter of fact. Always seem kind of busy, Old Boy."

"Busier men than you have found time to read this book, son. And they built the country on it. We've torn ourselves to pieces now. With greed and selfishness and unguardedness. We've sunk down into a spiritual coma. But if we ever do begin to build again . . ."

His voice drifted off with the hopelessness of trying to tell the whole full-blooded saga in a few casual minutes. Young Toby sat respectfully quiet a few moments, then he made a great stir of cheerfulness and good spirits that he hoped might wipe out the discomfort of the last few sentences, and he got up to leave.

"Well, Old Boy . . . been mighty swell talking to you this way. You take care of yourself . . . don't get into any mischief . . . until I come home, anyway . . ." He patted the Old Boy's shoulder, and the moment was dangerous with the long love between them. Then he straightened up quickly, saluted him again, this time with a very wobbly grin, and was off.

The old man heard him running down the stairs; he heard Williams clearing his throat with farewell emotion. In another minute the front door slammed, then opened again and closed softly as old Williams evidently watched him swing off down the street. The Judge sat quietly; he felt numb in all his bones. The old horse was tired tonight. It wanted to lie down and never have to get up again. But he could not let it lie down after all. He had thought the work might be finished by tonight. But he saw now that he would have to keep going awhile longer.

He picked up the book that young Toby had forgotten, after all his perfunctory thanks-a-million for it. He opened it on his knees and tried to read. But for once the words in his mind were louder than the words on the page.

"So . . . he couldn't accept it. Amory wouldn't take it, and

now Toby. I tried, Amoret. God knows I've tried."

He let his head fall on his chest. He knew he wasn't asleep, but he seemed to hear Amoret's voice speaking in his mind, "I know you tried, son. Never mind . . . men will be pushing to a new frontier soon. And when they pioneer they have to have the Word with them. They have to have it, or they would never keep going . . ."

"But the frontiers are all settled now," Old Toby cried in his mind. "There are no new frontiers these days. The pioneering is all over, Amoret."

He heard her gentle laughter. "Oh, no, darling. It's just begun! Men's hearts are still a wilderness. When they begin to explore that wilderness and to build in it and settle it . . . with brotherliness and peace . . . they'll come back to the Book, son."

Why, yes . . . these would be the necessary new frontiers! He knew now this was the answer. He remembered Amoret's picture of the collapse of materialism she had known . . . of the victims of that catastrophe pushing West to new frontiers . . . giving themselves the right medicine instinctively as Nature's children often do. But he had not seen until now where could be found the new frontiers which would be the modern remedy for this old moral dispiritedness. They would not be the easy frontiers of geography; these must be the less accessible outposts of the human heart to be settled and civilized.

He seemed to hear Amoret's sweet voice saying the words. "When they begin to settle the wastelands in their own beings, they'll turn back to the Book again." He found the words vastly comforting.

(3)

The plane came down like a swift arrow into the water, but it settled like a sick old body creaking and groaning in every joint. The left wing was completely under water in a few seconds, and the right wing stuck up at a crazy angle. The crew were coughing and groaning, and scrambling like ants out of the wreckage. All but Martin, the navigator. He was slumped in his place, and not a sound out of him. Bar-

ens, the co-pilot, was spouting blood and curses at the same time. The rest of them weren't saying much except the boy who was praying out loud.

Toby didn't know how long it all took. Time was a bloody smear that the waves kept washing away, so you couldn't tell how long a smear it really was. But at last they got the rubber raft launched; they got Barens in it, and after the confusion had settled into long silent horror, there seemed to be only the three of them left, himself, Barens, and Vike, the kid from Minnesota. Toby wasn't sure, really, whether he was dead or alive. This kind of stuff simply couldn't happen! Not to him.

The yellow bulge of the raft's edge seemed to be leaning sometimes against the sky and sometimes wallowing at the very bottom of the ocean. It rose up a long dizzy hill, and then skated nauseatingly down into the green crevices between mountains, over and over. He let his head loll against the big fat yellow doughnut which was the edge of the raft, and waves washed over him, and he wasn't sure whether they had dragged him out of the raft or not, and he didn't much care. But nothing dragged him out, except unconsciousness. Next time he came to himself, he found Vike had strapped him to his own belt. Vike was limp as a rag doll himself, but they were strapped together, and that gave them each something to cling to. Barens didn't seem to be anywhere around; too bad about Barens, he thought in a kind of gelatine of lucidness. Barens had a kid at home he hadn't seen.

There was a night and then there was a dawn, and after awhile his mind came reeling down a long corridor of shiny dazzling reflections like the white tiles of a subway station, and gradually he was conscious. Conscious and empty in his stomach, and as hungry as a horse. Vike was still sprawled in his rounded angle of the raft, and the belt between them was blackened with the water, and slimy and twisted. But it was still holding them fast. Toby reached up and touched his own face, and the flesh was spongy feeling from the water and the blistering sun. He wished he had something to put a shade over Vike's face.

He drifted off again, and next time he woke up it was night. The noisiest dam-fool night you ever heard, with the crazy raft still climbing mountains and then tobogganing down into the wet gullies, and the waves thundering and

snarling. But overhead there were stars. Just as sane and ordinary and beautiful as if nothing were the matter.

The first few days were the worst. After that, you got so you didn't care what happened. The two of you just lay there indifferent to everything. Sometimes Vike would wake up and talk a blue streak, all about his papa's farm in Minnesota, and about girls he'd made. You could listen to him or not, as you pleased. Sometimes you said, "Shut up, Vike, you're disturbing the peace."

"Okay," Vike would say. "You tell something, Lieutenant."

"I happen not to know anything," Toby would reply. Or perhaps he would begin telling something about when he was a little boy. But it wasn't easy to find things to tell a kid like Vike. Most of the things Toby could have told would have sounded like laying it on, to Vike.

"Say, you a rich man's son?" he asked once in futile hostility.

"Naw," Toby said. And then he added, "But I did happen to have a rich grandfather."

But most of the time they didn't try to talk. Most of the time they just lay with their eyes closed against the glare of the sun. Once Toby got to laughing to himself. He began shivering with cold, and then he turned the shivers into laughing. Vike lifted his head heavily and looked over at him.

"You crying or laughing?"

"What would a guy be crying about out here? I'm laughing, Vike."

"What the hell would a guy be *laughing* about?"

"Something my grandfather told me," Toby said. "I don't know whether he actually said it, or not. Anyway, I guess he thought it. Yes, I guess that was it; he only thought it."

"Well, what was it?" Vike said impatiently after a long drowsy silence.

"He said, 'Some day you're going to have plenty of time to think.' That's what we've got now. Plenty of time." Toby let himself laugh again at the humor of that. But Vike didn't do any laughing; it wasn't funny to him.

"Listen. We been on this God-damn pretzel a week. One more day and I'll go nuts."

Toby opened his eyes and looked at him, trying to measure his strength. Vike had such square teeth, and such a bony, scrawny little pup's face. He felt sorry for the kid. All that

bragging about women. Likely he'd never got past the knee with any of 'em. And now he was going to die out here like a sunburned mackerel. The least Toby could do was talk to him, maybe . . .

"Happened my grandfather was talking about the Bible," he said, just to start something.

"Bible? How in hell would you happen to be talking about the Bible?" Vike said, scarcely moving his lips. His eyes were still closed; his eyelashes looked white. So did his hair, now that Toby noticed it.

He thought he had the strength to try to tell him about that conversation . . . about the Old Boy, really, from the beginning. But he found that he was just too tired.

"Let's skip it," he said heavily.

Silence rocked between them, thick gluey silence that pulsed with the thunder of the waves.

"I got one," Vike said at last.

"One what?"

"Bible. Wanna look at it?"

Toby pulled himself up, inch by inch now. "Okay. Haven't anything else to do. At the moment, that is," he said with slow-motion joviality. But the other boy wasn't having any of his humor. Without opening his eyes, Vike was unbuttoning his tunic and reaching into an inside pocket. He brought out a G.I. Bible, zipped into an oilskin case. It wasn't much bigger than a cigarette case, and Toby wished to God it was a cigarette case. Well, no use thinking about that. "Where'd I strike a match if I did have one?" he thought with humorous practicalness. The other boy, with weary lassitude, was handing the little book over to him, as indolently as if he were really asleep.

Toby took the book in his hand. The last time he had held a book had been in the Judge's library. It had been a Bible, too, but a big one. That gave him a laugh. If Doctor Gallup came riding up on a whale and should happen to ask him, he could truthfully say, "The only books I've had in my hands in the last six months have been Bibles." Shows how damn silly statistics can be, doesn't it?

Well, as long as he was getting into the Gallup poll on the thing, he might as well read the book. Then he remembered how come he had held that other Bible in his hands back

there in the Old Boy's library. The Judge had wanted to give it to him. It had meant something to the old man to give it to him. And what had happened to it? He tried to remember what he had done with it. Had he lost it somewhere in the last six months? No . . . the fact was, he'd just forgotten to pick it up when he left the Old Boy. Fine thing. He'd said thank you, sir, or something like that, and he'd just walked off without it. That probably hurt the Old Boy's feelings . . . And now he would never have a chance to apologize . . .

Slowly he unzipped the oilskin, and opened the little book. The print was about as fine as termites marching across the page. He narrowed his eyes to read it, and words began forming out of the termites.

The waves washed over the raft; it rose and swooped down, once and twice, and Toby turned a page, lost in the reading.

"Gosh," he said once. He looked up at the sky. Then he went back to the book. "Gosh," he said again.

Slowly the other boy opened his eyes, and like hot marbles he rolled them over to look at Toby. But Toby wasn't paying any attention to him. He pulled himself up into a sitting posture.

"Read it to me," he said in a whining little croak. "It's my book, ain't it?"

Toby looked at him as if he had forgotten who he was. Then he began to read: "'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed . . .'"

"It's removed all right," Vike said.

"'. . . Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea . . .'"

(4)

The telegram was delivered, not to Amory, but to the Judge. Even in the midst of the crushing grief at its message, the Old Boy had tried to keep Amory from being hurt because Toby hadn't given his father's name as next of kin.

"Well, you see, he knew I'd always be here, son," the

Judge said to Amory. "He knew you'd be running about between Washington and New York . . . it doesn't matter . . ."

"Not now," Amory said. "Nothing matters now. And I guess the truth is, you've been more of a father to him than I ever was." Amory was an old man tonight. He paced up and down the floor with the telegram in his hand, and the Judge's heart ached as much for him as it ached for the loss of young Toby.

"I said nothing could ever catch up with me," Amory said in a muffled voice.

"You said lots of things, son," the Judge said gently. "We all say lots of things we don't mean, actually."

"All I ever really cared about was that boy. But I never seemed to get close to him, the way you did. I kept giving him things and trying. . . ."

"I know that, Amory."

The father, bent and sorrowful, walked about aimlessly as if he were looking for some comforting object which he could not find. The grandfather went back to the open book on his knees.

Amory stopped now and looked at him. There was always something in his father's face that he found nowhere else in the world. He had tried many times to name what that radiance was in the old face. Peace. That was it. Peace, in a world which had lost its peace, both inside and out.

Then he said something which surprised him. He said, "Read it to me, father."

The Old Boy looked up questioningly, then without any further comment he read: "'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.'"

(5)

The house was quiet as always, and such sounds as there were, seemed muffled and elderly, like the slow dragging footsteps of old people. But there would be a quickening in the house sometime this morning, for young Toby was coming back. He had telephoned from Los Angeles . . .

The door opened with a rush, and banged with a clatter. The trophies were dumped down in the hall, and up the stairs he came running. Old Williams, like a bat from the darkness, had shuffled out of the pantry, but too late.

"Please, Mr. Toby . . . I'd better go up first and tell him. His heart, you know . . ."

"Never mind, chum," Toby was calling down to him, "he expects me."

He expects me. The Judge said the words over to himself. They meant more than just the casual thing they were saying. For all the months the boy had been reported missing, he *had* expected him. He had kept on praying. . . .

"Everybody else gave me up . . . I gave myself up. But not the Old Boy," Toby was saying.

The lad said, "The rest of 'em thought I was dead. But not the Old Boy. He *knew*." Williams wouldn't know what on earth he was talking about.

The Judge would have liked to be at the door to meet him. But he couldn't be running around now. The old horse was hobbled at last to a chair. All the steeplechases had to be mental ones from here on. . . .

The boy was in the door now. He wasn't running in with a rush the way he used to. He came in slowly, and the first thing that his grandfather saw was that he had grown up. He had almost grown *old*! His face had carved lines about the mouth that nothing but suffering could possibly bring. But when he smiled and ran his forefinger across his upper lip, the way he had when he was a youngster and felt like crying, it was the same Toby, but a Colonel now. Twenty-four years old and a Colonel in the Air Corps.

They said nothing at all for a few minutes. The Old Boy gripped his hand and there wasn't anything that needed to be spoken just then.

"Well, I waited for you," the Judge said at last. "I knew you'd be back here, and mad as hops if you didn't find me still around."

"Durned right I'd have been mad," Toby said huskily.

The Old Boy laughed silently, his shoulders feebly shaking.

"Besides," Toby pulled up the hassock with one foot, and sat down on it, but he didn't quite meet the old eye, for he didn't dare. One word that wasn't safely casual, and emotion

would have scuttled them both. "Besides, you had a book back here that belongs to me."

"Yes? What book is that, son?"

"You know darned well what book it is," he said robustly.

"And I'm a guy that's going to need it. In my business."

Then Toby stopped trying to be casual, because something bigger than any surface of behavior was in the room. He leaned toward the Old Boy and peered into the lined old face. He saw the peace in that face, and he knew now from what it had come.

"We're all going to need it now, Old Boy. There's a world lying out there in fragments. It's got to be put together again. People are walking around these New York streets . . . they're in fragments too. They've got on their minks . . . the war's over and nylons have come back . . . the stock market's on the zoom . . . but inside everything is in pieces. An atom bomb's blown 'em to bits inside, and they're scared to death."

"So what shall we do?" the old man asked.

"We'll have to get back to the Beginning," Toby said. "We'll have to get right back to God who made the world in the first place, and ask Him to help us put it together again. And keep it together before we smash it with our fancy inventions."

The Judge reached out and picked up the book from the table. During the last months it had seemed to get heavier and heavier. He could barely lift it these days. But Toby did him the honor of not trying to help him. Toby just waited while he opened it on his knees. "You know there's a place where it says . . ." he muttered, trying to find the verse. Then he gave up looking, and said it from memory. "For God made man upright, but he has sought out many inventions."

"That's it," young Toby said. "And until each of them feels *upright* again, they're not going to find life worth living . . . Give me the Book, Old Boy. You don't need it any more. You know it . . . and I'm just beginning to learn . . ."

The Old Boy nodded thoughtfully. "You'll learn, son. You've got your eyes open to it now."

"Well, we'd better all of us get our eyes open, if we're going to build up this world again into something decent. It's going to be America's job mostly. But we can't do it unless God helps us."

The Judge said, speaking slowly, "That's what America was made of in the first place . . . faith in God and hard work . . . we'll find those again among the debris in ourselves."

"But this is a crisis . . . worse than the war itself," Toby said, clenching his fists with the urgency he felt. "Half the country doesn't realize it yet. We're the world's only hope now. We're the last chance . . ."

"The world's only hope," the Old Boy repeated. "Yes, we are. Lincoln knew it back in 1862. He said, 'We shall nobly win or meanly lose this last best hope of earth.' But we didn't lose it then . . . and we won't lose it now. We'll nobly win, if . . ."

(8)

Those were some of the things Amoret might have seen that night in the Springfield rooming house, if she had known how to look ahead as easily as she could glance back into the past.

But she was only an infant in vision, as all mortals are at this point, and so she believed that her small son's life had not been written into time, or into the pages of the worn old journal, or into the sleeping face of the child. She had no way of seeing that it only appeared unwritten because it was as yet unread.

She had to trust only her own unfocused faith in the outcome of her long life's errand, not knowing for certain that the letter she bore out of the past would be delivered safely to the future.

EPILOGUE

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

LUKE 15: 4, 5

Amoret must have dozed off, for suddenly now she was awake, still looking at the blank pages of Tobias' old book, and at the little Toby, innocent of all that lay before him, still asleep in the rooming house bed. Her hand was resting on the pledge she had just written below Tobias' old vow. She leaned closer and looked into the little boy's face, and she said again, "God, You know the future. You know it as clearly as if it were already here. You tell me what to do . . . give me some sign . . ."

The room was very quiet. Then downstairs she heard voices. A man's voice, then the boom of Mrs. Armitage. Amoret rose swiftly and ran across to the door, hardly knowing why. She opened the door and stepped out into the hall. Below her lay the steep dark stairs, and standing in the entrance hall in a gauzy tent of light from the lamp she was holding, was Mrs. Armitage, a squat pyramid, talking to a tall man.

"You *are* Mrs. Armitage, aren't you?" the man was saying impatiently.

"Yes, but I've told you . . . I've no more rooms vacant, sir."

The man said, "They told me at the livery stable they had recommended this place to a woman and her little boy. I've got to see them . . . it's very important . . ."

He looked up then, although Amoret was standing so still at the top of the stairs that she might have been only a voiceless shadow. She could tell from his scowl that he could not actually see her, but that somehow he knew she was there. Without even an apology to Mrs. Armitage, he came bounding up the stairs, faster than most men would have come, because he was lame and could not humiliate himself by moving slowly.

"Amoret . . . I had to find you . . ." he said.

He didn't touch her. She noticed that, and she thought, "This is the first time he has not relied on touching me. This time he's not going to make my love for him do the persuading . . ."

She spoke to Mrs. Armitage, who went muttering back to

her own quarters, and then she backed into the bedchamber, with her eyes still on Stephen's face.

"I had to come," he said. "I turned back this morning, but you had already left . . ."

He was speaking without assurance. He was beginning with none of his usual skillful strategy. She did not help him at all. She stood just inside the door, saying nothing. He looked over at the bed, and beside it he saw the two old books lying in the splashed light from the lamp. He went over and picked up the book he had held so angrily this morning. For a moment it seemed as if he had forgotten Amoret in the room. He had his back turned to her and she could only see the large, almost tender way his shoulder brooded as he held the book, looking down at its pages. She thought swiftly and reluctantly, for she wanted to be firm against him, "He looks like a man reading a love letter . . ."

The room was quiet a long time; only a small sigh came to her from the pages he fingered. Then at last he turned, and his face had the old boyish mischief in it.

"Where do you find those things you tell Toby? . . . All I ever find are the 'begats' and the 'begorries.'"

Part of her ran across the room to him, laughing. But that part did not show in her face, for she refused to be beguiled by him.

"You have to want to find them first," she said sternly.

Then he came limping across the room to her. But he did not drop the books to take her in his arms as she half-expected. He held the books, and still he did not touch her.

"I do want to find them, Amoret," he said, without a trace of laughter or guile in his voice. "I do want to find it now."

"Because you think that's the only way to have us back?"

"No. I've fought it long enough."

As he said those words, he saw his whole past with new understanding. He had fought it; but the reason was because he had never been indifferent to God. Other people didn't bother much, one way or the other. But he had fought, because he had known that once he gave in, he would turn himself over completely to God's wills and ways. Underneath the hostility and the anger, was a great unaccepted, unwelcome love of which he had been afraid.

The strange amorous enmity he had battled out with Amoret ever since this thing had come between them, was in a

way quite like the relationship he had had with God. He was afraid of loving them both too much . . . he was afraid of losing his own importance to himself . . .

He said now to her, "I've tried to make a fool of God. But He . . . He's made a fool of me. I've given myself everything I wanted . . . and yet I have nothing out of it. A man can't seem to give himself the great riches . . . he has to find them in some other way." He was speaking so humbly that his words barely came to her. But he went on talking in a faltering, thoughtful voice.

"You know that prodigal son Joel Adams talked about when he came back? Well, today while I was driving along, I found out what that story means. Joel said *he* was that boy. Maybe he was. But I'm that boy, too. Maybe everybody is. Anyway, I want to come back from wherever I've been all my life, Amoret . . . I want to get back to being my Father's son . . ." She knew there were tears on her face now, but she didn't want him to see them.

He was in no danger of seeing them, however, for he was looking inside himself at that long weary journey he had taken into a far country, at those feasts of husks he had devoured. Somewhere down in himself he was knowing that shut-away remembrance of Home, not a place on earth or in heaven, but a knowing and a certainty within.

Some day he would tell Amoret all about it, if she wanted to hear. He would tell her about that Sunday morning long ago. That was really the only occasion in his life when he had had what he called any "dealings with God."

Opal Larsen had come to his house to ask him if he would try to persuade Joel Adams to come back to their church. He had decided with gleeful treachery that he would go out the next day and give the preacher money to speed him on his way to California. But when he had gone out to the Artors' field, he had not done that at all. Instead he had found himself by some sleight-of-hand of self-deception bringing about Joel's return. Joel had said he was the only man in the town who could have persuaded him to stay . . . and he had persuaded him!

The church had declared that God had brought Joel Adams back to them. And Stephen had said to himself, "God, indeed . . . it was I who did it." But in saying that, he had seen that God had played a trick on him, using him to do the

very thing Stephen had intended to prevent. God had played a trick on him by changing his thoughts momentarily . . . making him see the thing in a different light . . . For years it had seemed to him like a trick. When he thought of God, which he did no oftener than he could help, it had been as a man smarter than himself, who had outwitted him.

But a curious phenomenon had been the offshoot of this impression he had of God. Almost from the very day he decided that God had dealt treacherously with him, men began dealing treacherously. The pattern of trickery he seemed to see repeated over and over then, in all the three years in California. The idea he had about God seemed to take shape in the men he encountered.

And it seemed to him, furthermore, that the idea Amoret had about God took shape in the people *she* met . . . the fatherly, helpful men, the motherly, tender women. Why, even the men who had burned down her house had ended up being her staunchest friends! Perhaps that was some undiscovered law about this world! Perhaps we each do create our world in the image and likeness of our own God . . . a world without plan to the people who cannot accept Him at all, a stern world for those who worship the old Jehovah, an innocent, safe world for those who know a loving Father . . .

However that might be, this morning, while he was driving along tortured and muddled by all that worried him, he suddenly saw in a new way that old baffling episode when God had reached down into his own mind and had re-arranged his conclusions. If God had wanted to bring something about, as the church so piously believed, why hadn't He done it directly? If He wanted to change something, why hadn't He just changed Joel Adams' mind? After all He must have had free access to that mind. Why had He bothered with Stephen's mind at all? Stephen had never invited Him into *his* mind . . .

During all the years he had puzzled over that episode concerning the three of them, God and Joel and himself, it was the first time he had ever thought of this point. If God had power to change men's thoughts, why hadn't He just put it directly into Joel Adams' mind to come back to the church? *Why had God bothered to reach Joel Adams through Stephen Phelps?*

The answer to that blaze of question was speaking in a

calm and quiet voice within him. Why, God must have had something he wanted to show to *him!*

As he reached that amazing point in his thinking, a wordless, nameless voice was speaking through him, and it was saying: "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee."

Could it be possible that God had included Stephen Phelps in that transaction because *he* was also important to God?

Suddenly a strange thing happened to him then, driving along smartly in his carriage on the way to Landsville. A warm glow began sweeping through him, a homesick, little-boy comfort so strange and unfamiliar that he felt a prickle of tears behind his eyeballs. It was a forgotten and outgrown comfort, like that reassurance he had known when he was a motherless nine-year-old and Mrs. Durkee had said to him sometimes, "Come here, Stevie. Durk'll hold you on her lap awhile . . ." Could it be possible that what those mealy-mouthed religionists had been talking about all the time was *this!* This wordless safety of belonging, of being used and necessary!

All day the glow had lasted in him . . . With a start, he came back to this room, and to the woman standing before him, looking up into his unguarded face.

"I have to have it, too, Amoret," he said painfully.

"If you think it's only a way to have us come back . . ."

"No. I must have it whether you ever come back to me or not."

Then she put her arms around him. He could only stand in the quick circle of her arms, for his were holding the books.

"We want to come back to you," she said. "Mr. Lincoln convinced me of it, Stephen."

"Mr. Lincoln?" he asked in perplexity. The surprising sources this woman quoted for her deeds! The unexpected persons she dragged into their affairs!

"You know," she explained with adorable feminine illogic, "it's like the nation, darling. Mr. Lincoln said, 'a house divided against itself cannot stand.' We're like that, you and I . . . we can't be divided against ourselves, Stephen . . ."

Perhaps the stumbling sentences from those complicated submerged thoughts of his, which bubbled up into the conversation, sounded as strange to her as Mr. Lincoln in this moment sounded to him! He shifted the books into one arm then, and grasped her with the other, laughing at the won-

derful wildness of this conversation between them. She wasn't making sense, but that didn't matter. She was coming back to him!

He tried to picture the new life he was letting himself in for now. They would have God in their affairs, and Mr. Lincoln, and the Psalms and the Proverbs, and their own child, and Abner Popel, the half-wit. The town's children would troop through his yard to school; the ladies, God help him, would dote on him and ask his advice about church matters. There would be a conglomeration of the preposterous and sublime in the Phelps' life from now on, a mingling of laughter and holiness, of heavenly worship and earthly passion.

Yes, it would be a fascinating life, as Amoret herself was fascinating to him in every absurd, illogical lovely way she had. Life would inevitably be like this from now on; it could not be otherwise, according to that new law he had discovered. For he would be worshiping the God he understood, who was a gentleman with a fine sense of humor and a tenderness for *all* His children! That image and likeness would be his world now, new from this day onward.

He felt younger than he had felt for years. By Gad! he'd enjoy himself going around and getting better acquainted with that all-embracing yet gentlemanly God, who did not argue with you but merely stated His side of the question as deeds, which it appeared you and other men were performing . . .

He broke off suddenly, for he had just stumbled upon a stunning discovery. *Why, this was the inheritance his father had left him in the will!*

He had believed all this time that he had rejected that legacy and had broken that will. He saw now the laughable, wonderful truth; it had taken him twenty-three years to accept the bequest.

**BOLD,
DEEP-PASSIONED
DREAMERS ALL,
THEY TORCHED A
FIERY LEGEND THROUGH
THE VIRGIN LAND**

STEPHEN PHELPS—Driven by love and valor to tame the unknown wilderness...

JOEL ADAMS—Ruled by one burning passion strong as the young land...

AMORET—Magnificently beautiful, utterly iron-willed, she led two mighty men along a blazing path to glory...

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